FUTURA

THE NEW AVENGERS

Fighting Men

Justin Cartwright

THE NEW AVENGERS 4:
FIGHTING MEN

Also in the *New Avengers* series:

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THE NEW AVENGERS 2: THE EAGLES NEST
THE NEW AVENGERS 3: TO CATCH A RAT

Justin Cartwright

The New Avengers 4: Fighting Men

Based on the script by Brian Clemens

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A Futura Book

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PROLOGUE

Peter Travis filmed the soldiers approaching. He hid behind a giant marula tree, training the lens of his Bolex camera on the leader of the men, a tall man with a black eyepatch.

In a clearing, perhaps two hundred yards away, an African village was just stirring as the dawn broke over the heavy rain-forest. A speckled, grey rooster scratched vigorously between the huts for the remains of last night's maize porridge. A boy was unpenning some scrawny cattle for the day's foraging. The only thing that distinguished this village from any other in this part of Africa, was the presence of an African in battledress, a Cuban olive green. He was sitting by a small wood fire, his rifle propped negligently on a log while he boiled water in an old jam tin.

'Two hundred yards, load mortar.'

The tall man with one black eyepatch surveyed the village from the edge of the clearing. The mortar was loaded with a satisfying clunk. The corporal knelt with the next round as the sergeant prepared to fire.

'Three rounds, fire.'

The first shell knocked out three huts. The second made a large hole in the cattle pen, blowing the small boy and ten cattle fifty yards. The third completely destroyed a larger hut, as men, some of them naked, came running out.

'Finish them off.'

Two other men opened fire with FN rifles, cutting down the panic-stricken Africans. The sky was full of wheeling birds, screeching and cawing, but from the village itself

there was only silence, apart from the crying of a baby.

The tall man watched the smoking huts for a moment.

'Well done lads,' he said crisply. 'Let's get out of here.'

Within a few minutes they were jogging back down the jungle path. Their truck was only five miles away, although there was a three hour trek to the nearest government held town.

In Umbezi, Peter Travis filmed the return of the soldiers from the cover of a hut. One of the men had to be helped from the truck by his mates, but whether as a result of wounds or disease, he could not tell. Travis unloaded the magazine from the Bolex camera and packed it away. He had to get back to London tomorrow.

The tall man with the eyepatch sat in the bar of the Umbezi Grand Hotel, sipping a glass of the local lager. With him was Delgado Robert, government minister for defence. At the airstrip a Hercules transport was being loaded by the soldiers.

'The people of our country thank you very much, Colonel,' said the Minister.

'It's kind of you to say so, sir. We like a bit of active service, keeps the men on their toes.'

'The bank transfer is already completed.'

'Good, good. Got to be going now. Take off at eighteen hundred.'

'I understand, Colonel. The Englishman, Travis, left for the airport today at midday. I am expecting a report at any moment.'

As if in response to his words, a waiter appeared and summoned the Minister respectfully to the telephone. The tall man pushed his lager aside and waited impatiently, glancing at his watch.

'Colonel, Travis left by private aeroplane half an hour

ago. He filed his flight plan with control. Here I have made a note.'

'Fine. We'll take care of him. Goodbye Minister, a pleasure to do business with you.'

The Minister waved a fly away from his face, stood up again and shook hands with the Colonel, who saluted smartly, turned and walked briskly to the door.

CHAPTER I

Mike Gambit stood in the dark near an old Nissen hut. He checked his watch. Somewhere in the night sky above Kent he could hear the sound of a small plane approaching. At this distance it was no louder than a lawn mower in a far-off garden, but all the time the drone grew louder and more insistent. He stepped out into the middle of the runway, which, judging by the growth of weeds and grass, was seldom used. He switched on his powerful flashlight.

Now he could see the lights of the plane. It circled once and began its approach. Gambit hurried back to the Nissen hut as the Cessna's landing lights came on. He watched the plane touch down and turn back towards the old buildings in a wide arc; it stopped a few hundred yards away, near what was once the main hangar. A figure, silhouetted against the night sky for a moment, got out and disappeared behind a row of huts. Gambit waited for him, but he did not reappear. After a few minutes, Gambit went in search.

Behind the main hangar he saw Travis's body lying face down on the overgown concrete with a man bent over it. Gambit ran at the man, who jumped up, a knife in his hand. He had been trying to cut away the valise from Travis's wrist, where it was attached by a thin, metal chain. Gambit slowed when he saw the knife and approached the man warily. The man was large and bulky, like a badly wrapped parcel, but he moved with great speed and lightness; he slashed at Gambit with the long-bladed knife. Gambit swayed out of the way, but the knife caught the front of his jacket and sliced right through it and then through his shirt, just flicking the skin of his stomach. The man lunged again. Gambit's left foot shot out, his right

hand chopped downwards and he plunged his other hand into the man's throat. He went down choking, and the knife clattered to the ground next to him. Gambit picked up the knife and walked over to Travis. A cursory glance was enough to establish that Travis was quite dead.

Behind him, the other man unexpectedly got up and ran away. He must have been even tougher than he looked. For a moment Gambit considered chasing him, but the contents of the valise for which Travis had died were more important now.

Steed would agree with that.

Purdey eyed Gambit's stomach with amusement. 'Only a flesh wound.'

'Thanks a lot. At least I expected a little feminine sympathy. And my new jacket is ruined.'

Purdey was unimpressed. She lay back comfortably on the leather sofa, her long, long legs draped casually over the back.

'Purdey, why are you lying upside down like that?'

'Because I like it.'

'You shouldn't push your luck, you know. There's a limit to what a healthy red-blooded man can stand.'

'Go and have a cold shower or put some Friars Balsam on your incredibly serious wound while I lace up the projector. Steed will be along in a moment.'

They were in Gambit's apartment, an apartment packed with gadgets and weapons. Gambit collected weapons, everything from blow-pipes to hand-made shot guns. He also loved gadgetry, TV monitors, video recorders, mini computers, ideographs – even an automatic coffee maker with fifteen settings.

In Travis's valise, Gambit had found two rolls of sixteen millimetre film which the laboratories had processed, priority, in a few hours. Purdey laced up the projector while Gambit changed.

'Purdey,' he called from the next room.

'Yes?'

'Don't you want to see the scratch on my inner thigh?'

'No thanks. Some other time maybe.'

'This is one hell of a job. No perks at all.'

'Steed come on in,' said Purdey. Steed was already in.

'Thank you,' he said, 'I will.'

'What?' called Mike hopefully, 'speaking to me?'

'No, Steed's here.'

'How is he?' asked Steed.

'Oh he's complaining as usual.'

'Lovely morning, isn't it,' said Steed, hanging his bowler on a pre-Columbian poisoned arrow. 'Oh hello, Mike, how are you feeling?' he asked as Gambit appeared, freshly changed.

'Fine thank you, just a few superficial wounds as Purdey calls them. Nothing to worry about.'

'Good,' said Steed, 'well, let's get on.'

Gambit touched a button, blinds drew electrically over the windows, and a screen lowered itself from the roof.

Soon they were watching scenes of troop movements, commando-style, in far-off places; Africa and Asia by the look of them. A road sign, 'UMBEZI' appeared and the commandos walked past it, wearily. That was the last sequence.

'Well?' asked Steed.

'Shall we see them again?'

'I think we had better, Travis was obviously trying to tell us something,' said Purdey.

'Purdey, do you know, you're really coming along,' said Steed, 'your powers of deduction are really rather remarkable.'

'Thank you.'

Gambit ran the rolls of film again.

Down in Wiltshire, near Salisbury Plain, General

Stevens and his aide, Captain Tony Noble, drove down a quiet lane.

'A spot check should be just that, Tony,' said the General.

'Yes sir,' said Noble, who was driving.

'When a unit has been stationed in England as long as this outfit, they get pretty sloppy.'

'Quite, sir.' Noble had heard it all before, more than once.

'A soldier needs active service. That's what we are, after all – trained fighting men.'

'Exactly, sir. Though I believe Colonel Miller has something of a reputation as a stickler, sir,' he added diffidently.

'Oh does he? Well what do you think of that?'

The General pointed out of the window. A guard box stood empty by the side of the road and beyond the gate it was supposed to be guarding, the barracks of 19th Special Commando seemed curiously lifeless.

'Right, Tony, straight to the guard room. Let's find the duty officer and put a stop to this sort of thing right away.'

The car drew up outside the guard room and Noble walked briskly in ahead of the General.

'Atten sh. . . .'

The words froze on his lips. He rather enjoyed announcing the General, because it produced an electrifying effect. But the guard room, although neat and tidy, was completely empty. For a moment the General was silent.

'What the hell's going on here, Tony, bloody slackers, let's find out eh?'

The parade ground was quite empty as they skirted it. In the barrack room, neatly made beds lined the walls, but there was not a soul in sight.

'Perhaps they've gone on a special exercise of some sort, sir,' ventured Noble.

'Special exercise, eh?' snorted the General contemp-

tuously, 'special exercise. Not much damn good if you come back and find the Ruskis moved in in your absence, is it now?'

'No sir!'

'I hope there is some sort of explanation, I can tell you.'

'Don't move. Stay right there,' said a voice.

The General and Noble turned around to see a soldier pointing an FN Rifle at them.

'Now look here, man,' said Noble, striding forward. The soldier fired one round, shattering Noble's right leg. The General moved to help him.

'Stay where you are, sir,' said the soldier.

'Don't be absurd. This man needs medical attention.'

As the General spoke, the roar of a transport plane coming in could be heard.

'What's going on here?' The General moved towards the window.

The soldier poked him in the chest with his rifle.

'Don't move – sir.'

Outside the Hercules taxied to a halt at the end of the runway, and a tired, battle-stained regiment began to disembark, jeeps and transport down the ramp and personnel out of the back. The General watched in astonishment. The men were wearing jungle green, but he could not make out any insignia at this distance.

'Sorry to hold you like this, General,' said Colonel Miller some time later.

'For God's sake man, what on earth is going on? Captain Noble needs urgent medical attention. One of your men shot him in cold blood.'

'Orders. We can't tolerate spies, sir.'

'Spies? Are you barking mad? I'm a general officer in the British Army. Spies, you impertinent . . .'

'Lock him up, Corporal,' said Miller.

'Come on then Dad, off we go,' said the Corporal.

Miller hit the Corporal sharply across the face with his glove.

'Sir to you, Corporal; General Stevens will be accorded every privilege of his rank while he's our prisoner.'

General Stevens appeared to be suffering from shock. He stumbled ahead of the Corporal like a man sleepwalking. He looked very old and frail.

In the sick bay, Captain Noble hovered on the borders of consciousness. A medical orderly had given him some pain-killing tablets for his leg, cleaned it and bound it up, but he knew he had to get to a hospital if he wanted to save his leg. As he lay there, he became aware of some movement at the far end of the room. Two soldiers, still in fatigues, were carrying a stretcher into the sick bay. They unloaded another soldier gently on to a bed.

'Well,' said Private Harris to the orderly, 'what you going to do with him?'

'What's wrong with him?' asked the orderly.

'I dunno. Feverish. He looks pretty bad to me.' He turned to the soldier in the bed, who was tossing about and moaning, his face not so much pale as completely drained of life.

'You'll be OK Freddy old son, soon as they get a doctor to you.'

The orderly took Harris aside.

'You know I can't get a doctor to him. You know the Colonel's orders.'

'Look, my friend. Freddy needs a doctor. He's picked up some tropical lurgie which you never even 'eard of. So get him a doctor fast, or you'll 'ave a death on your conscience.'

'You know I can't. *You'll* have to speak to the Colonel. It's not my fault. I'll do what I can to help him, but it's not much.'

Even in his confused state of mind, Noble wondered, not for the first time, just what was happening here.

Harris went straight to the Colonel's office. He was shown in by the Colonel's aide.

'Private Harris to see you, sir.'

Harris entered and saluted smartly.

'Yes, Harris, what is it?'

'Sir, I would like to make a request.'

'Well, go on, make it.'

'I would like to request a doctor for Private Spinks, sir.'

The Colonel eyed Harris steadily for a few long seconds.

'Request denied. Anything else?'

'He's dying, sir.'

'He's a soldier. Soldiers have to come to terms with death.'

'But, sir, this is some tropical . . .'

'Get out of here, before I put you on a charge.'

Harris saluted, turned about and marched out of the room.

Steed had known Major Prentice for a long time. So when Prentice said it was urgent, Steed took the Jaguar Special, the Big Cat, straight down to the HQ of Military Intelligence. From the road you would imagine that it was an ordinary albeit large country house, set in parkland and surrounded by a high wall. The man on the gate was expecting Steed. In the fields in front of the house, Ayrshire cows grazed peacefully. But the sounds of gunfire from behind the house fell strangely on the ears.

Prentice was firing an L4A4 Bren gun on the range. Targets rose and fell at between a hundred and a hundred and fifty yards in a random pattern. Each time Prentice was quickly on to them. Steed put his fingers in his ears. After a while, Prentice got up, removed his ear muffs, and spoke.

'Good of you to come, Steed.'

'Sorry, I can't hear you, I've got fingers in my ears.' He removed them. 'Ah, that's better, what's the problem?'

'It's one of our generals. We've lost him.'

'Perhaps you've just mislaid him,' said Steed, 'it happens all the time.'

'Perhaps it does,' said Prentice, handing the Bren gun to an instructor. 'Check the sights. Infra red,' he said to Steed by way of explanation.

'When did you last see him?' asked Steed.

'Well, he set off yesterday on one of his surprise visits.'

'Surprise visits? To where?'

'Hardly be a surprise visit, would it, if everyone knew?'

'True.'

'Anyway, he hasn't come back. He was expected last night for a general staff meeting, but he didn't show. Enquiries this morning have proved useless.'

They began to walk out on to the range itself. Prentice removed a hand grenade from the attachment on his flak jacket and pulled the pin.

'It seems likely that he's been abducted or met with an accident . . .'

'Careful old boy, we might all meet with an accident if you don't get rid of that thing,' said Steed.

Prentice flung the grenade casually in the direction of a dug-out, where it exploded immediately. They were showered in dust and gravel. Steed dusted his chocolate brown jacket.

'Did he often carry out these surprise visits?' he asked.

'Way of life for the old boy. Always doing it. With his aide, Captain Noble. Race around like blue-arsed flies trying to catch some unit on the hop. Usually succeed too.'

Steed and Prentice now came upon a strange landscape. It consisted of blasted trees, large boulders, dilapidated houses, some no more than rubble, and artificially created depressions and hollows. On four or five acres an urban

battlefield had been created, like a piece of Belfast or Beirut. Suddenly from behind a wall, a man hurled himself at Prentice. Prentice disarmed him easily, and threw him to the ground.

'Don't hold the damned knife up like a fish slice – jab, kick and jab again, man.'

'Yessir,' said the young soldier, lying ruefully in a puddle.

'Charming walk, this,' said Steed. 'Still it narrows it down a bit.'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean if he set out from here by car he couldn't have gone all that far. We should be able to find out which . . . oh look out. Got him, good show.'

Prentice had disposed of another trainee without trouble.

'Look here, man, you've got to go for the belly or throat, understand? Sorry Steed, what were you saying?'

'I was saying that there can't be more than five or six units nearby, can there?'

'True. Foster's the man to start with . . . no, no, not him, he's a civilian.'

With a banshee cry, a soldier hurled himself at Steed, bayonet fixed. Steed parried skilfully with his umbrella, and jabbed him in the stomach.

'Lie down. You're dead . . . Foster. Not Colonel Elroyd Foster?'

'Yes, he's the man to see. He knows more of the intimate details of the units around here than anyone. Do you know him?'

'You might say one of my colleagues has a relationship with him.'

'Crusty old beggar, but he knows his onions,' said Prentice, mixing his metaphors somewhat.

CHAPTER 2

Private Harris had had a tough life. He was one of the youngest boys ever to have been sent to Borstal for Grievous Bodily Harm. For a while it had been a source of pride to him, given him some status. The governor had befriended him and got him into the Army as a boy soldier. He had enjoyed that. At least he didn't have to go home to his mother and his stepfather with their endless bickering and rows. He had got in a spot of bother as a boy soldier, but then when he was eighteen they transferred him to Special Commando, under Colonel Miller. This had been the turning point for him. He grew to love the outfit and the fighting that went with it.

So, as he drank his fifth whisky, he was in a dilemma. He knew what the Colonel would do to him if he tried to get help for Freddy. But Freddy was dying. And Freddy had saved his life more than once in action. He couldn't let him down, whatever the cost. He got up from the bar of the O.R. mess and went to find some transport. All he could come up with was a five ton truck, but he parked it as close to the sickbay as he could, and went in.

'Look, you can't just come in here visiting whenever you like.' The orderly was nervous, because he had two almost certain deaths on his hands. Freddy lay in his bed, so still and colourless he might already have died.

'I'm taking him out of here.'

'Don't be bloody stupid. Look, you've been down the pub, just leave it alone.'

Harris hit him in the way prescribed in the manual, just below the line of the jaw and an inch away from his adam's apple. Tony Noble, in spite of his pain and near unconsciousness, watched as Harris picked his friend from the

bed, and carried him, fireman's lift, out of the room. He had some difficulty getting Freddy into the cab of the truck, which was very high up. There was so much room that he was able to lay Freddy out on the seat next to him. He set off quietly at first, then at speed for the Hospital.

He parked the truck a few hundred yards away from the main gates of the hospital and carried Freddy to Casualty. There was nothing going on in Casualty at this time, too early for the pub fights and road accidents. The young doctor examined Freddy perfunctorily before hastily sending the sister for a respirator.

Purdey was still pondering upon the message of the films. Gambit was thinking of going out to dinner.

'Purdey, how about an intimate little candle-lit get-together, just you and me and a bottle of wine – or two. You know the sort of thing.'

'I do. That's why I'm treading carefully.'

'Oh come on, we deserve it.'

'All right, just wait while I change.'

Purdey jumped up and strode through to her bedroom. Mike could just see her outline through the beaded curtain that hung over the doorway.

'Can I come and do you up?' he asked hopefully, as he saw her slip into what looked like a dress from where he was sitting. But then his view wasn't very good.

'No thank you, Michael, I think I can manage on my own.'

'I've got very skilful hands.'

'So I've heard.'

The phone rang.

'Steed,' said Purdey, 'how did you get on?'

'Fine. Apart from almost ruining my new jacket. But that's another story. Isn't old Elroyd Foster your uncle?'

'Uncle Elly. Yes, he is.'

'I thought so. Look I would like you to go and see him

tomorrow. He may be able to help us. I'll be round in ten minutes to tell you all about it.'

'But, we were just . . .'

'Good, jolly good, see you in a few minutes.'

The young doctor was a little confused. 'A tropical disease?'

'Yea, we were doing an exercise in one of them hot countries, and he come over all funny like this.'

The doctor consulted his medical text books and made a few phone calls. Freddy was breathing more easily with the help of the respirator and some colour was returning to his cheeks. The doctor hoped it wasn't typhoid or lassa fever. He had just decided to get him into isolation, and out of casualty, when the wide swing doors burst open and five men in commando uniform, all carrying automatic rifles, rushed in and surrounded him, the patient, Harris and Sister. Sister tried to run for the door, but a soldier grabbed her and told her to stay put.

'This man is very ill,' said the doctor.

'Don't worry Doctor, we'll take care of him.'

'I don't think you understand, this patient must go immediately to intensive care.'

The doctor tried to stop the stretcher party as they picked Freddy up, but a soldier hit him from behind. The last thing he remembered was five faces muffled in balaclavas, like carol singers on a frosty night. The tube from the respirator hung below the bed, still breathing mechanically even though there was now no patient.

Outside Harris tried to make a run for it, but they were ready for him and manacled him in the landrover.

'Don't be stupid, Harris,' said Bowden, 'you know what's coming to you. Give us something to look forward to.'

The other men clearly found this amusing, because they laughed as the Land Rover sped away.

Freddy died on the short journey back to the camp.

Colonel Miller convened a court martial immediately. Instead of a table, he sat with two other officers round a huge, ceremonial drum. Harris stood facing him, flanked by two guards. Round them in the Officers' Mess were the trophies, prizes, and mementos of the regiment. An old flag, tattered and blood-stained, hung directly behind Miller's head. It was the colour carried at Waterloo. The blood had faded to a reddish ochre, but it was the most treasured evidence the regiment had of its past glories.

'You will have a fair trial, Private George Harris. The evidence please, Sergeant.'

The Sergeant described the sequence of events leading up to Harris's return to the camp under escort. The orderly gave evidence. It took ten minutes in all.

'Do you have anything to say?'

'I was just trying to help a friend, sir.'

'The court is only interested in whether or not the facts as recounted here are true or not. What do you say?'

'Well, yes, I mean that's what happened, sir, but I had to help Freddy.'

'Is it true that I ordered you not to attempt to get a doctor for Private Spinks?'

'Yessir.'

'Is it true that you disobeyed this order?'

'Yessir.'

'I think it is clear to the court that in disobeying a direct order, you put your comrades at arms at risk. It is not the job of the private soldier to question orders, Harris. There are, in military life, larger considerations and wider objectives which override ordinary, day to day considerations. This is why we have an Army. If every soldier questioned every order, there would be no Army. There would be a rabble. This regiment depends upon loyalty. Absolute loyalty. By attempting to save one man's life, you have put at risk hundreds more. As president of this court martial, my first duty is to the regiment. You are therefore found

guilty. It is the sentence of this court that you be shot by your fellow soldiers in the morning. Sergeant, take the prisoner away and select a firing squad.'

Harris was led away, to a solemn tattoo on the drum, beaten by drummer of almost the same age as Harris – twenty.

The morning air was bracing. Purdey sped along a country road with the top of the MG down. Uncle Elroyd had been only too delighted to hear from his beautiful niece. She was expected for mid-morning tiffin, a habit acquired in India and never forsaken. Purdey liked her uncle. He was rather eccentric, but Purdey had long known what a lot of people took some time to realise, that Colonel Foster was not half as stupid as he appeared to be. He disguised a keen intelligence behind a rather crusty and pompous exterior. As he had once remarked, this way 'he could catch the buggers with their pants down'.

Purdey was not far now from the camp where her uncle held sway. It was a military area, all heathland and gorse, with roads and tracks leading off in every direction, and signs pointing the way to various establishments. Armoured cars and convoys of military lorries seemed to be everywhere. She came round a corner, to find a man with a red flag in the road. She pulled up and he walked over to the car.

'Sorry, Miss, the range is in use.' He pointed to a sign, which said CAUTION. FIRING RANGE. STOP WHEN RED SIGNAL IS SHOWN. On top of the sign was a red triangle.

'Will it be long?'

'No, won't take long Miss. There is another road.'

'No, I'll wait.'

Purdey got out of the car. 'You're the 19th Special Commando, aren't you?'

'Yes Miss, the glorious 19th.'

'The mad 19th, I hear.'

From some distance away came the sound of magazines being clipped into a dozen automatic rifles. This was followed by a shouted order, which the wind carried away over the heath. The soldier froze until the sound of gunshots, which came in short, concerted, bursts, ended.

'OK, now Miss.'

He turned to the signal and by pulling a lever changed the red triangle for a green disc.

'What's your Commanding Officer's name?' asked Purdey suddenly.

'Miller, Miss, Colonel Miller.'

'Mad Jack Miller, they call him, don't they? Mad Jack?'

Purdey didn't wait for an answer as she gunned the motor. So she did not hear the single, pistol-shot that completed the execution of Private Harris.

From his cell, which was really only a store-room barred up, General Stevens watched the party take Harris away and with horror watched them bring back the corpse. He wondered what had happened to his aide, Captain Noble, and he demanded to speak to Colonel Miller. He felt as though he had been caught in a terrible practical joke, but a joke that had no end.

'I want to see Colonel Miller.'

'I'm afraid the Colonel is busy, sir.'

'Look, man, do you realise what you're doing? This is treason, mutiny – don't you understand?'

'I'll tell the Colonel you want to see him sir.'

The General slumped on the hard divan. It was hopeless.

Meanwhile, Captain Noble, despite the excruciating pain in his leg, had slipped out of the sickbay and crawled down a corridor. In a cubicle he found some fatigues which he donned with difficulty. He hobbled out of the back of the block, across an exposed piece of asphalt and

fell, panting, into a patch of long grass, surrounded by gorse bushes. As he teetered into unconsciousness, the stretcher party carrying Harris's body crossed the asphalt going the other way.

Colonel Foster's office was in a superb Victorian building dating from the time when Britain ruled half the globe. Some people thought that Foster dated from that time as well. Above him a huge fan hung from the elaborate plaster work of the roof. Above the fireplace hung a picture of a horse gazing vacantly across the room at a picture of a second horse, this one got up in military finery.

The Colonel himself was wearing riding breeches and a tweed jacket, and under his desk lay an old golden labrador, who wagged his tail approvingly when Colonel Foster shouted at his servant, 'What time is it, Turner?'

'Tiffin time sir.' Turner came hurrying from the anteroom.

Foster turned his ruddy face towards the hanging clock.

'No it's not, you idiot. It's twenty-five seconds past. And if you go on standing there with your mouth gaping open it will soon be thirty seconds past, so what are you waiting for?'

'Nothing sir.'

Turner didn't move. Foster thought he looked like a snake mesmerised by a mongoose, a sight he had seen once or twice in India, and read about in Rudyard Kipling more often than that.

'No wonder we lost the Empire, what are you staring at, man?'

'A woman, sir.'

'A woman?'

Colonel Foster looked out of the french windows in the direction of Turner's gaze, to see Purdey fastening her wrap-around skirt around her legs, before vaulting nimbly out of the MG. She strode across the lawn, despite the

signs forbidding such a thing, and waved cheerily in the direction of Foster's office.

'She's coming this way, sir,' said Turner nervously.

'Of course she's coming this way, you blithering idiot, she's my niece.'

'Oh, thank heavens.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing sir, it's just that women are against the regulations.'

'Go and get the tiffin. No ice in my peg, all right? And a gin with a measure of orange, dash of bitters and a ginger ale.'

'Who is that for sir?'

'For my niece of course. Go on.'

Purdey's face appeared at the french windows. She flattened her nose against the glass, stuck out her tongue, and made a horrible face at her uncle. Her uncle leaped up and ran to let her in; the labrador growled.

'Uncle Elly,' said Purdey embracing him.

'Hello my dear,' he glanced towards the door, where Turner could be heard with the drinks tray, 'but not too much of this Uncle Elly stuff, do you mind? It's taken me some time to get the men to think of me as a disciplinarian.'

'I understand Uncle. Mummy always said you were as soft as butter, but a bit of a bully.'

'Ha, ha. Jolly nice to see you. What brings you here?'

'Business, I'm afraid.'

'Well it can wait until after tiffin.'

Foster bellowed at the anteroom. They could hear the glasses tremble. Purdey sniggered and Foster gave her a big wink.

'Just coming, sir,' called Turner. A few moments later he appeared with a huge, silver tray.

'Won the damn thing in a polo competition out in Jaipur.'

For a moment Purdey thought he was talking about Turner, but then she saw the inscription on the tray.

'You gibbering idiot. How many times have I told you ice is for polar bears?'

'Sorry sir, I got confused.'

Foster picked the ice out of his chota peg with distaste. He handed Purdey her drink.

'All right Turner, you can go now.'

Turner had that mesmerised look again, as Purdey sat with one foot on the floor, and the other on the Colonel's desk, her toes almost touching the day's orders.

'Yessir,' said Turner. There seemed to be a spring in his step as he left.

'Deuced pretty,' said Foster.

'Yes, isn't he?' said Purdey.

'You, Purdey, not that little toad Turner.'

'Thank you, Uncle Elly,' she said, tweaking his nose.

'Well, cheers.' Foster was not sure whether he was more embarrassed or pleased to have his nose tweaked by his beautiful niece. He decided that after they had talked he would take her for a walk around the Mess. That would give some of the young subalterns something to think about.

'Right, well what's the problem?'

'General Stevens.'

'Not your type at all, I'm afraid. He lacks my charm and sophistication.'

'He's lacking altogether at the moment. He's disappeared.'

'For a moment you had me worried. I see. Missing. Well, I haven't got him.'

'No, but you might be able to tell me where he could be.'

'I can check up on my charts and see. He makes periodic surprise visits, you know. We can see who was due for one. When did he disappear?'

Purdey explained the circumstances, insofar as they were known, of the General's disappearance, and Foster consulted his charts.

'He could be just about anywhere, but I think he probably went to see the 15th/20th or the Ordinance chappies or possibly the 19th Commando.'

'The 19th Commando. Is that Miller?'

'Mad Jack. Mad as a coot, but a damned fine soldier.'

'As I drove through they were out on the firing range.'

'Not due for target practice, but that doesn't surprise me. He runs that lot on very personal lines. Almost like a private army. In fact they are the dregs. Every criminal in the army, but tough as old boots.'

After their discussion, Purdey and the Colonel went for a drink in the Mess, which, as Foster had thought it would, got a few eyebrows going.

'Care to stay to luncheon, Purdey?' asked Foster eagerly.

'Can't Uncle Elly, got to be going now.'

Purdey gave her uncle a big kiss, which was much discussed by the subalterns over luncheon, and sped off in her MG. She headed straight for the firing range.

General Stevens finally got in to see Colonel Miller.

'You're a disgrace to that uniform.'

'My dear General, I don't suppose sitting on your fat, deskbound backside you would have any idea of what the life of a fighting soldier is all about, but I have been carrying this uniform into action all around the world. We, at least, are trying to do something about the state of the world.'

'What the hell does that mean?'

'It means that while fellows like you are sitting around HQ drinking gin and occasionally playing at being soldiers, my regiment is out in the jungles and forests fighting for the free world.'

'Are you mad?'

'I don't think so. We are earning our keep and we're doing what we were trained for.'

'You won't get away with this.'

'I think I might. You have come along at a very fortuitous time, General. You might just turn up in one of the theatres of war where we operate, dead unfortunately – killed in action – and provide me with the excuse that I was just following orders. Secret mission, that sort of thing. The General insisted I tell no-one. What do you think of that?'

The General felt ill. 'And what about my aide?'

'Generals normally have aides, don't they? He will be found with you. With a very convincing leg injury which contributed to his eventual sad demise. Oh, do sit down if you're feeling faint, General, it must be the heat. Most unseasonal.'

There was a knock at the door.

'Not now. Come back later.'

'It's urgent, sir.'

The Colonel and Bowden conferred.

'It seems your aide, Captain Noble, has escaped. Where he imagines he's going, hopping on one leg, I would not know.'

He turned to Bowden. 'Assemble a mortar section, Sergeant, we need some practice.'

The Colonel turned to the door. 'You will excuse me General, but I have a little local difficulty to attend to. I did so want to have Noble along on our trip to El Bazrah, but you'll just have to do on your own.'

He left the room and an orderly came in to escort the General back to his cell.

In the meanwhile, Prentice had telephoned Steed again.

'Sorry to bother you again, Steed, but something

damned odd has happened. I've sent a chopper for you. Do you mind?'

'Not a bit old chap, we can continue our discussion of seventeenth century army insignia.'

'Over a bottle of port in the Mess.'

'Quite.'

'It seems to be here.'

A helicopter landed on Steed's lawn, frightening the horses.

'Has he arrived? Good. Hope you don't mind, I rather anticipated that you would say yes?' said Prentice.

'I'll just get my toothbrush. Goodbye.'

Steed went out to the helicopter. The pilot saluted smartly. Steed got in, the pilot jumped in next to him, and they were deftly away, frightening the horses again, before Steed had even fastened his helmet in the correct manner. The flight to HQ took only ten minutes. It was a lovely day for a helicopter ride; the pilot flew the machine at near maximum speed and came straight in to land without a moment's hesitation on the helicopter pad. They were obviously expected.

From the pad, Steed jumped straight into a car. Prentice was already sitting in the back seat.

'Good morning,' said Steed, 'how unexpected to see you again so soon. Fifteen minutes ago I was wondering whether to take the grey or the hunter out for a leisurely ride, and here I am. Life is strange.'

'Sorry Steed, but a doctor at the hospital was attacked last night. Bloody fool only told his story this morning.'

'I'm not the local bobby, you know.'

'Honestly, I do. It's just that because of the manner of his attack, the police got in touch with us. It seems there was a commando raid on the hospital. They snatched a patient and the man who had brought him in and clobbered the doctor.'

'Well, well. And you, naturally suspicious as you are,

think there may be some connection with the disappearance of an elderly general?'

'I do.'

'It would seem logical. Ah, we have arrived.'

The young doctor, whose name was Laing, seemed to have been hit very hard on the head. He was bandaged up so that most of the top of his head had disappeared. He described what had happened. Steed was most interested in the patient's symptoms.

'What do you think it was?'

'I'm not sure. To be honest I have had no experience of tropical disease. But his friend said that he had picked it up on an exercise in the jungle. Whatever it was, it was terminal. I don't think he could have survived outside intensive care. I haven't had a chance to look up the symptoms, to find out exactly.'

'That's all right Doctor, no need to worry.'

Prentice thought Steed's bedside manner was impeccable.

'So they bundled this man and his friend off and hit you on the head?'

'Yes. One of them said that they would take care of him. For a moment I thought it must be some secret Army establishment, you know nerve gas or something. I don't know. It all happened so quickly.'

'Well you just get some rest, Doctor, and keep taking the tablets.' Steed smiled encouragingly at the doctor and they left.

Steed and Prentice settled down in some comfortable armchairs.

'An exercise in the jungle?' Steed pondered.

'If it was a regular unit, why was the patient not treated in an Army hospital?'

'My thought exactly. Unless, as the doctor suggested, it was a unit engaged on such secret work that the patient

could not be entrusted to a hospital. Any chance of that, Prentice?'

'I don't want to boast, old fellow, but there is no unit, no establishment, no platoon, run by the Army or the Ministry of Defence, that I don't know about.'

'Jolly good. Is it the vintage? Good, in that case I shall have another glass.'

Major Prentice lifted the Waterford crystal decanter with practised ease.

Purdey found, to her annoyance, that the warning sign was up again when she got to the range. She turned off the ignition and sat in her car. From the range she could hear the sound of shells whistling through the air, and landing with a thud.

Colonel Miller was directing operations himself. An 81 mm mortar was mounted on the back of a Land Rover transport. He searched the range with his binoculars to see if he could catch another glimpse of Captain Noble. Noble had managed to scramble through one minefield without injury so far. The Colonel wanted to finish him off before he got to the stream which marked the edge of the restricted area. Suddenly he got a glimpse of Noble, hobbling and hopping desperately in the direction of the main road.

'Two hundred and fifty yards, fire.'

The mortar section let one go and quickly dropped another shell down the tube. There was a surprisingly long pause before the shell dropped and exploded twenty yards from Noble. As the dust and debris cleared, Miller saw Noble get to his feet again and struggle onwards.

'Twenty degrees, South South West, two hundred and seventy-five yards, fire.'

Mortars were far too inaccurate to use against a single, small target, but he could not use rifles because Noble was making for the road and the farmland beyond. The bullets

would travel half a mile off the range, causing heaven knows what sort of damage.

Purdey felt the ground tremble when the last shell landed. A cloud of smoke drifted over the brow of the hill, about two hundred yards away. As it cleared she could see the figure of a man, hobbling along. He appeared to be trailing one leg. She jumped out of the MG, stripped away her skirt to expose her tunic and began to run, with her long, effortless stride in the direction of the stricken man. As she set off, a shell landed between them, the shock waves knocking her down. She was only winded, and almost immediately got up again. There was no sign of the man as she got to the top of the hill.

Miller suddenly saw Purdey appear at the crest of the hill.

'Smoke, smoke.'

The mortar section removed the shell already in the tube and replaced it with a smoke bomb.

'Fire. Same range, fire.'

Purdey fell flat as she heard the whistle of the shell. Twenty yards away she saw Noble, peering from behind a bush. He too fell flat.

'Over here,' she called out, as the smoke bomb landed and exploded. Even as she said it, she was enveloped in thick, acrid smoke, so dense that it might have been night. She struggled as best she could towards the spot where Noble had fallen.

'Over here. Where are you?'

The smoke began to clear slightly. Suddenly she saw a figure emerging.

'Are you all right?' she shouted.

The man walked towards her.

'Yes thank you miss. Are you all right? You shouldn't be here, this is a restricted area. There are unexploded shells all over the place. We were right in the middle of mortar practice.'

'I saw a wounded man.'

'Well, you would do, wouldn't you? At least you would see one of the lads acting wounded, on an exercise? Only logical, isn't it?'

Bowden quite fancied his acting abilities, which normally only found a yearly outlet at the Christmas show. From the smoke behind the sergeant, a Land Rover appeared. Standing on it was Colonel Miller. Purdey looked at his stern, bronzed face, with the one eye covered by a patch, with a tremor of recognition.

'Civilian all right, Sergeant?'

'Unharmed, sir.'

'Damned stupid place to be going for a walk. Didn't you see the signs? I've got a good mind to turn you over to the MOD police.'

'I'm so sorry. I got bored waiting for the sign to go down. I'm going to the fête in Nether Grimbleby, you see.' Purdey smiled her most winning smile.

'Escort her back to her car, Sergeant. Try and be more sensible, gel.'

'I'm very sorry, honestly. I didn't mean any harm, it was all so exciting.'

There was no sign of Noble.

'I knew you would see reason,' said Gambit, as Purdey rushed into his apartment, shouting 'I need you, quick'.

Gambit opened his arms and closed his eyes. Nothing happened. He opened them again to find Purdey tinkering with the projector mechanism.

'Come on Mike, quick, get the films up.'

'What's going on?'

'Don't just stand there saying, "what's going on", get the films up and I'll tell you.'

'Why are you looking so dusty? And why do you smell so like a bonfire? Is it a new fragrance on the market? It's like barbecue sauce.'

Before Purdey could do him some serious damage, however, he had the projector running.

'Old movie time, is it? We've seen these before, remember?'

'I do remember. Stop it, now, stop the machine.'

It was a close-up of Colonel Miller, standing deep in some jungle surrounded by his men.

'Mad Jack. That's who it is. That's what Travis was trying to tell us.'

'Mad Jack and Potty Purdey. What are you talking about? You come rushing in here trailing leaves and grass all over my expensive carpet, smelling as though you have been char broiled in a Turkish restaurant, shouting "Mad Jack". Are you all right? You know that rabies is coming any day, you weren't bitten by a dog or anything?'

'Michael Gambit, this man,' she pointed at the screen, 'is Colonel Mad Jack Miller of the 19th Special Commando. He is the man in all these films. Run on a bit, that's it, look there he is again behind the banana tree, and there he goes into Umbezi. Now do you understand?'

'Sort of.'

'He has been doing things in various parts of the globe with his regiment which he didn't ought to have been doing. Peter Travis was collecting documentary evidence of this to show us, but someone got to Travis first.'

'Now we only have to find out what he was doing and then put a stop to it.'

'You get there in the end. Eventually. Finally.'

CHAPTER 3

Bowden reported back to Colonel Miller after Noble had been returned to the sick bay.

'He's under proper guard, sir. I've put the man responsible on a charge.'

'Well done Sergeant.'

The Colonel and Sergeant Bowden had a special relationship, born out of similar temperaments. Both of them were men of action, who preferred fighting to drill. Over the years Bowden and Miller had established an understanding which Miller had never achieved with his officers.

'Will that be all, sir?' asked Bowden.

Miller was looking at a map of the world which almost covered one wall of his office. On it was every river, stream, tributary and creek and every town, village, hamlet or settlement known to the Army Ordinance Division anywhere in the world.

Miller turned from considering the world. 'The General is our fuse.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'General Stevens. We now have a fuse to light a bomb.'

'I don't follow you sir.'

'So far we have been small time soldiers. Here a little action, there a bit.'

'And we can handle it, sir.' Bowden was proud of their achievements. He felt that perhaps the Colonel was belittling them.

'That is true. I am well aware of that. But now we have an opportunity to do something big, very big. We can create our own war on our own terms. And Stevens will be the scapegoat.'

'I don't quite follow you sir.'

Miller turned to the map. He pointed to a country in the Middle East.

'This is El Bazrah. What do we know about Bazrah, Sergeant?'

'They're loaded, sir. More money than sense.'

'Exactly, though I might have put it more delicately myself.'

'Sorry sir.'

'Now how are we going to get at this money, Sergeant? They don't want us. They have American, Russian, Chinese and Tunisian advisers and equipment. We can't just march in there and grab the stuff, can we?'

'No sir.'

Bowden was beginning to get an inkling of what the Colonel was thinking,

'Unless, sir . . .'

'Unless, Sergeant?'

'Unless we have a good excuse, sir.'

'Very good, Sergeant. What sort of excuse would you have in mind?'

'Orders sir. Secret orders from General Stevens.'

'Who unfortunately is killed in action in Bazrah, leading a raid on that defenceless, or nearly defenceless, little rich country.'

'But why would he do that, sir?'

'Because Bazrah has been flouting its oil agreements with Britain for far too long. And General Stevens, misguided patriot, decided it was time to teach them a lesson.'

'Blimey, bloody marvellous – excuse my French sir – fantastic. And in the process a lot of money turns up missing.'

'Quite. We'll have to move fast before Military Intelligence starts trying to find Stevens. We fly out tomorrow. Nobody but you knows where we are going. Prepare the orders. I'll brief the officers on this little exercise tonight.'

'Bloody marvellous, sir, I've got to hand it to you, bloody marvellous.'

'Don't stand there shaking your head, get moving.'

'Yessir,' said Bowden, saluting smartly and about turning.

'One last thing, Sergeant.'

Bowden paused by the door.

'Yessir.'

'The oil revenues of Bazrah, awaiting transfer to Switzerland, held by the National Bank of Bazrah for the past twelve months are eighty two million dollars in gold and one billion dollars in cash. So we'll need an extra Hercules.'

'Oh my gawd.' Bowden was quite overcome.

As he left the room, Miller's restless gaze returned to the map. He was calculating how long it would take to divert the Hercules from Bazrah to drop the gold for safe-keeping in Umbezi with his friend the Minister. He and the Minister would be able to buy the new missiles which would put paid to the rebels for ever. And the Minister's little country, with the old King as a figurehead, would become the financial centre of Africa. 'The Switzerland of Africa' was how the Minister had described it. There was no limit to the possibilities of a little well-organised military enterprise in this troubled world.

Prentice and Steed were tipsy. There was no question of it, and the half empty decanter of port supported the conclusion. Next to the port was a battlefield on green baize, and on the battlefield were deployed thousands of toy soldiers. On the floor beside Prentice was a pile of documents and requisitions – all the accumulated paperwork of the 19th Specials over the past three years.

'Now what I can't understand is why Prince Rupert didn't bring the cavalry in here over this stream, like this, instead of charging through the wood,' said Prentice, moving a few horsemen on the baize battlefield.

'Or why General Ireton did not counter with his muskets from here,' said Steed.

'Good point, Steed, will you have the other half of your drink?'

'Thank you very much, I will. Excellent. Alternatively, if you had brought the cavalry in from there, Ireton could simply have turned his battery away from the copse, like this.'

'Ah, but then these Sussex Yeomen, here, could simply have . . .'

'Hello. Look what we have here, Mike, two grown men playing soldiers.'

Purdey smiled as she looked down at Steed and Prentice.

'Don't let us interrupt you,' said Gambit. 'Whenever you're ready, we've got something to tell you. It's important, but it can wait.'

Steed put down a company of lancers, right in a marsh, and looked up at Gambit.

'You are going to tell us that the man who has abducted General Stevens is probably Colonel Miller, am I right?'

Gambit was astonished. 'How did you know?'

'Research old fellow, research,' said Steed, pointing at the papers. 'Your move, Prentice.'

Purdey sat effortlessly on the table between Steed and Prentice, one leg between them and the battlefield.

'Very old ploy, that,' said Steed to Prentice.

'Beats the pincer movement hands down.'

'How did you know from that pile of papers that Mad Jack Miller was the man?'

'Deduction. Quite simple really, wasn't it, Prentice?'

'Piece of cake, old boy, for the trained mind.'

Purdey removed her leg from the table.

'Do you want to know our news or not?' asked Gambit.

'Certainly. Let's have it,' said Steed.

'Well, the man in the films Travis brought back, with the eyepatch is Miller.'

'Good, good. That would explain the malaria pills.'

'Malaria pills? I think they've had too much of the '47,' said Purdey in a loud whisper to Gambit.

'Malaria pills are not really necessary when you are due for an exercise in Norway, now are they?' said Steed.

'This is true,' said Gambit.

'By going through these papers, with the guidance of my colleagues – silly move, I've got all your hussars cornered – Major Prentice here, we have discovered a number of curious irregularities in the requisitions for the 19th Specials. Like malaria pills when they were supposedly on an exercise in the frozen north of Norway.'

'We're still faintly puzzled by a recent order for camel saddles, but no doubt you can throw some light on this?' Prentice looked hopefully at Gambit. 'No? Pity. It tends to suggest, to the trained mind, that the 19th Specials are going somewhere hot soon.'

'We also concluded that General Stevens may have stumbled upon something irregular when springing one of his surprise visits on Colonel Miller. Right, now I turn my cannon round, voila, and turn them on your remaining company of cavalry, pouf, and the battle of Edge Hill is concluded, though with a new result. Thank you, Major. Yes I will have a drop more.'

Purdey and Gambit were a little deflated. It was so like Steed to be one step ahead without really appearing to try.

'Well, Major, perhaps you should tell us all you can about our Colonel Miller,' said Steed, when they were all sitting comfortably around a new decanter of port.

'Mad Jack's a fighting man first and foremost. When he joined the Army there were still a few little wars going on, and he revelled in it. Quite fearless, if a little foolhardy, everyone's tip for the top at one time. Unfortunately he tended to dabble in politics. Always implying that he knew better than the responsible minister or under-secretary

how to deal with the locals. So eventually he was given the Special Commando.

'Why "special",' asked Purdey.

'They're a bit like the SAS except without the brains. When you've got a nasty little job to do which requires a bit of muscle, you send for the Specials. Every rogue and hard case in the Army end up there. Miller has welded them into a pretty tough and effective fighting force.'

'Major Prentice and I noticed a rather interesting statistic in the course of our research. Not a single man's gone AWOL in the past three years.'

'Not one?' asked Gambit.

'Not a single, solitary, one.'

'So what is our next move?' asked Purdey.

'I suggest you penetrate their defences, Purdey, by popping along to one of the pubs where they drink, and finding out about their plans. Like when they're off and where if possible. That sort of thing. And the Major here has you already kitted up, Mike, as Captain Gambit, misfit and rebel, who is to join the Specials tomorrow. Your posting has already been announced.'

'But I always wanted to go to sea,' said Mike.

'Hard luck my boy. Just a drop more of this, and then I think the regimental tailor will be ready for you, am I right, Major?'

'You usually are, Steed.'

While Prentice's tailor, ably assisted by a department of military intelligence, gave Gambit a new identity, right down to a record of insubordination, adventure, and petty theft, Purdey made her way to the Dog and Duck, the pub nearest to the Specials camp.

General Stevens was visited by a tailor that evening as well.

'What the hell are you measuring me for, man?' he shouted.

'Sorry sir, can't tell you, Colonel wants me to make up a uniform for you quick.'

'I can guess, number ones with all my decorations on them.'

After the tailor had gone, the General sat helplessly on his small bed. The storeroom was only a few feet wide and just long enough for the iron bed. He hadn't slept in anything so uncomfortable since Alamein. Miller was measuring him up for his funeral clothes. He would be found dead wearing the full battledress and regalia of a general, while the madman went about his crazy plans. Judging by the amount of activity going on in the camp, they were moving soon. He could just see the end of the airfield where stores were being loaded, and boxes of ammunition, mortars, sub-machine guns, and even some small missiles were being ferried back and forth.

He called the guard to the door. 'Tell that Colonel Miller I want to see him.'

'He's very busy sir.'

'Look here, when this is all over there are going to be some court martials, you know, and some pretty long sentences. If you tell me your name, I will see if I can help. All you will have to do is take a message . . .'

The soldier slammed the door in the General's face. About five minutes later, Miller appeared. He was in a good humour, as active people often are when busy. In fact he wanted to boast a little to a senior officer, something for which he had long had a weakness.

'I hear you have been trying to bribe one of my men, General. Good try, logical. But it will never work. For one thing the men have all got records of one sort and another already, I can get them locked up at any time I like, and for another we have our own, rather elemental disciplinary system here. None of your namby-pamby nine to five soldiering here, General. These men live and die for the

regiment. Any man found guilty of disobedience is shot, immediately.'

'Are you crazy? This is not Ruritania, you know.'

'General, what you and the people in Whitehall have forgotten, is that the private soldier has joined the Army to get away from the horrible necessity of living in this century. He wants to be given orders, rewards, discipline. He finds life outside confusing and difficult. We have a simple code here – the men understand it and appreciate it.'

'Does your simple code extend to having to kill my aide?'

'You will be glad to hear, General, that your aide is alive and well – for a while, anyway.'

'What does that mean?'

The General's face was drawn and pale. He knew only too well.

'It means, General, that tomorrow, on your special orders, we move to secure British interests in Bazrah. As you yourself have said on many occasions, the Arabs are flouting their agreements there.'

'I may have said it, but I would never go to the lengths . . .'

'Ah but you would. Indeed tomorrow you will be leading us to Bazrah to secure the airfield, appropriated without consultation by the government of El Bazrah, and the oil refineries, likewise appropriated.'

'Don't be silly, no-one in their right mind is going to believe such a thing.'

'I have the orders to prove it. In fact they are being typed even now. If you would just sign here,' he said, producing a single sheet of paper, 'we can get them properly sealed.'

'I am not signing anything.'

'Are you sure?'

The Colonel produced his Browning 9 mm and pointed it at the General's head.

'If you are going to kill me anyway, what's the difference?'

'True, General, true. It doesn't make a lot of difference anyway, my cryptography department has already produced a fine facsimile of your signature. Captain Noble was deceived by it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Despite the poor condition he finds himself in after running about the countryside dodging mortar fire, he was astonished by your letter to the C-in-C explaining the action you were proposing to take against Bazrah.'

The general signed the piece of paper the Colonel proferred. He was shaking. All he wanted was to get out of this tiny room and away from this nightmare.

As the General had noticed, the camp was a hive of activity. The runway near the hangars was floodlit. From the stores came weapons the Colonel had been saving for just this exercise. Ten of his men had received camel training in Oman – the saddles were loaded aboard with special care. Other non-standard equipment included specially adapted forklift trucks for the gold bars and an issue of salt pills. The whole operation would not take more than eight hours, but the heat in Bazrah, even at midnight, was furnace-like. That was why most of the princely family were spending the summer abroad, in cooler places.

Terry Jones, the man who had first seen the General and his aide, and arrested them, was in the Dog and Duck with some of his mates. They had heard the orders for tomorrow and were determined to get a few pints of British ale down them before they flew out to heaven knows where. With the Colonel in charge, it was bound to be somewhere tough. Terry had heard a rumour that it was to be in the desert.

'Incredible, isn't it, sitting here having a pint of Badger's, and tomorrow night, wham, we're in the middle of the

Sahara shooting up a few camel jockies. Right lads, whose round is it? What, not mine again?'

'Here Terry, get a load of this, coming in the door.'

A hush fell over the Dog and Duck as Purdey came in. It was a little pub, very functional, with military souvenirs and pictures all over the place, including a glass case full of regimental ties. Women were seldom seen in here, except on the occasional stag night when somebody hired a couple of elderly strippers from Salisbury.

Every eye in the place was on Purdey as she walked up to the bar.

'Nice quiet spot, this,' she said. 'A large tomato juice, with ice.'

'Evening. You on your own?' Terry had a bit of a reputation as a man with the ladies.

'I was until I met you, you smooth talker,' said Purdey. 'I imagine you are all in the Army, are you?'

'Yes. Special Commando,' Terry said with pride.

'Special Commando. Gosh, that's sounds exciting. What's special about it?'

The man at the piano started playing again as the pub settled down, but he was quite alone. All twenty men were clustered around Purdey. When she finished her tomato juice, they fell over themselves to buy her another.

'Well, Special Commando is called that because we do special jobs. Dangerous jobs.'

'You like danger do you,' said Purdey.

Terry put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a meaningful look.

'I can handle anything,' he said.

Purdey removed his hand from her shoulder. 'Not me, thank you.'

Unseen by the rest of them, Sergeant Bowden came in the door of the pub. His first reaction, of pleasurable surprise at seeing a pretty girl, changed when he saw who it

was. He did not stop for a drink but went straight back to the camp.

'Playing soldiers, that's what you are. I bet you've never been further than Salisbury Plain,' said Purdey.

'See this?' said Terry rolling up his sleeve. On his forearm was a fresh, jagged wound. 'See this, how do you think I got it?'

'Bump into a filing cabinet?'

'I got that in Africa.'

'Funny place for a package holiday,' said Purdey.

'From a guerrilla armed with an assegai.'

'Gosh.'

'Yea. And do you know where he is now?'

'No, do tell me.'

'He's six feet under now.'

'Charming. And I suppose you got this in China?' said Purdey to a young soldier with his arm in a sling.

'Well you won't believe it,' he said shyly.

'Try me.'

'I got it falling off a camel.'

The other men laughed. Even Purdey chuckled.

'I was in Oman training on camels.'

'Camels. What would you want to do something like that for?'

Terry took up the explanations again. 'We go anywhere, do anything. Real fighting outfit. Between you and me some of the stuff we do is a bit, you know . . .' Terry winked. 'And we're off to the desert soon, big operation. Now the Colonel likes to be prepared for anything. That's why he had some of the blokes trained specially in desert warfare.'

'Where are you going?'

'I dunno. But I've heard that we fly out tomorrow for . . .'

'ATTEN . . . SHUN. Colonel Miller.'

Bowden's voice quietened the pub instantly. The pianist stopped playing, the men, although in civvies, stood rigidly to attention, and Colonel Miller strode up to the bar. Only Purdey was still sitting, perched elegantly on a stool.

'Oh hello, jolly nice to see you again,' said Purdey.

The Colonel ignored this remark. 'This pub is now off-limits. Get back to camp. Sergeant.'

'Sir.'

'Arrest this man. Close confinement. Get them out of here.'

Terry was handcuffed by a military policeman. As they began to file out of the bar, Miller turned to Purdey.

'This is no place for a woman. You really must allow me to escort you out of here.'

'No honestly . . .' Purdey's words choked when she saw that Miller was pointing a pistol at her.

'But I insist,' he said suavely.

'Oh well, in that case, how can I refuse.' Purdey got off her bar stool.

CHAPTER 4

When day broke over Major Prentice's study, Steed woke along with it. Prentice was lying stretched out in a leather armchair, looking slightly rumpled.

Steed stood up and retrieved his jacket from the stuffed head of an Indian buffalo, where he had hung it the night before as they re-wrote the history of Waterloo, following their success with Edge Hill. This time, with Prentice's help, Napoleon had won. Steed looked at his watch. It was six thirty.

'Wakey wakey. Lot to do today.'

Prentice did not move. Steed glanced at the battlefield. He moved Blucher's second cavalry division.

'Ah that's where I went wrong. Never mind. Wait until we do Poitiers, then I'll get him. Come on Prentice.'

Prentice stirred slightly, giving Steed cause for hope. But he simply moved into a more comfortable position. Steed fetched a linen table napkin from the next room, tucked it around Prentice's chin as though he were going to give him a shave. For a moment he admired the effect. Then he picked up a soda siphon and directed it carefully at Major Prentice's face.

'Don't panic,' shouted Prentice, jumping up, 'only a little downpour, the monsoon's started early, no need to panic.'

'Morning Major,' said Steed. 'Ice and lemon?'

'Steed, what are you doing?'

'I have had a thought.'

'What's the time?'

'It's six thirty-three precisely.'

Prentice slumped back in his chair.

'All right, what is your thought?' Soda trickled down the back of his neck, but he seemed oblivious of it.

'I have to warn you that it is a rather dramatic thought for six thirty.'

'Go on.'

'It seems to me that if Miller is proposing some venture which requires camel saddles, not only is he going somewhere hot, but he is going somewhere where there is oil. And where there is oil, there is usually trouble. We could be on the brink of a war. A real war. So let us not linger abed on such a fine day, shall we?'

Reluctantly, Prentice heaved himself up.

'World War Three or not,' he said, 'I am starting my day as usual with scrambled eggs and a pork sausage.'

He rang for his batman.

Purdey had slept less soundly than Major Prentice. Miller had interrogated her closely four or five times without getting anything from her.

'Look, you are a spy. It's quite obvious.'

'I'm British. Why should I want to spy on you?'

'Let's not play games. You can't pretend that you were simply passing this way twice in one day.'

'I was. To and from the fête and Nether Grimbleby. It's a free country.'

'Who sent you?'

'If you think I'm a spy, why don't you call Military Intelligence and hand me over?'

Colonel Miller tried to control his anger. He had a great deal of preparation to make for tomorrow's expedition to El Bazrah. He hated loose ends of any sort.

'Right, I have work to do. You wait here. I'll be back in an hour and see if you've changed your mind.'

Purdey was in a bare room, furnished only with an empty ammunition box. Beyond the steel bars of the room was a larger room – an ammunition store. Purdey sat on

the empty box and whistled a tune cheerfully, until Miller came back.

'Changed your mind?'

'Yes.'

'Good.'

'Yes, I've decided I don't like you after all.'

'Now look here. You may or may not know who I am, and you may or may not know something of what I am doing here. But this is all largely academic. I have you safely in my care and I shall keep you here until either I find out who you are or, secondly, I find your presence embarrassing. Either way you don't have much of a future. So why not make it easier for yourself by telling me who sent you and what you want to know. Let's be reasonable.'

'What admirable military logic. You forget one thing, Colonel.'

'What's that?'

'That is the human factor. Even a military mind like yours is curious. You want to know who I am and who sent me. It troubles you.'

'So someone sent you, you admit it?'

'I do not. I was simply following your thought to its logical conclusion. If someone had sent me and you discovered who it was, you could then dispose of me. However, while you are curious I have a good chance of staying alive. Am I right?

'Don't think I am above using less subtle methods of persuasion than I have so far.'

'I don't think you are at all.'

'The world is in a state of war. We operate on that assumption at all times here.'

'What a rousing little speech.'

The Colonel, as Purdey rightly suspected, had never hit a lady, though he was tempted. He turned on his heel. He paused at the door.

'You will not be fed until you tell me who you are and who sent you.'

'Oh good. I was thinking of going on a diet anyway.'

She crossed her legs and sat comfortably on the ammunition box. By morning she had almost mastered the art of sleeping while sitting on a tin box and leaning against a wall.

Miller was in a poor humour by morning. What with the girl and his preparations, he had not been able to get more than an hour's sleep. He had trained himself to go without much sleep, but the thought that things were not going exactly to plan preyed upon his mind. Bowden came in.

'What are we going to do with Private Jones, sir?'

'Gun carriage.'

'Court martial sir?'

'Sergeant we haven't got time for a court martial. We have to be off by 1800 hours. Just get all the men on a charge on gun carriage punishment. Over the range and back again.'

'Yessir. By the way sir, message from HQ, new adjutant's arriving this morning.'

'What new adjutant?'

'I gave you the message last night sir. A Captain Gambit.'

'Get his record sent in here. This is no time to be taking some milk sop on board.'

'Yessir.'

Sergeant Bowden assembled a party of ten. The old gun carriage used on ceremonial occasions was towed out on to the parade ground. A guard brought Terry out, stripped him to the waist and lashed him to the gun carriage with thick, rough, ropes.

'Gun carriage detail, at the double, forward march.'

The gun carriage was heavy. The men heaved at the ropes and the big, iron clad wheels began to move. Even on the parade ground the gun carriage jarred painfully.

'I said at the double, you horrible malingerers, you'll be back in the lock-up for another ten days if you don't get moving, *at the double.*'

The gun carriage began to move quite fast. It hit the edge of the parade ground with a terrible jolt which brought a cry from Private Jones. As it set off across the range on a rough track his body was buffeted and wrenched so painfully that he began to scream. The men pulling the gun carriage pulled ever faster so as to shorten his ordeal, but in doing so the pain increased appallingly. Colonel Miller watched the proceedings from the window of his office with satisfaction. It wasn't that he liked to see pain inflicted. He was no sadist. It was simply a question of discipline and order. Certain fundamental principles had to be maintained. He turned away from the window to look at the Army record of Captain Gambit. It cheered him up somewhat. Captain Gambit was an out-and-out villain.

The villain, trying to look at ease in his new uniform, approached the camp in his borrowed car. The Sam Browne dug him painfully in the ribs, and the collar was a little too tight. He followed the signs, most of which were in a baffling code of military initials, in the direction of the parade ground and the guard room, which is where the guard on the gate had respectfully suggested he present himself. As he drove towards the guard house, he saw that some strange ceremonial was going on. Across the firing range, in his direction, came what appeared to be a gun carriage, pulled by ten soldiers at the double. He stopped the car to watch. As the gun carriage came closer, he wound down the window of the car and, with a shock, heard the pitiful cries of Private Terry Jones as the gun carriage bounced off the edge of the parade ground. It was like a scene from

the Crimean War. The man's upper body, spreadeagled, was lashed with ropes to the transom and his legs to the trail of the gun carriage. As the wheels hit any obstruction, his ligaments were stretched and torn; Gambit thought it was like the rack on wheels. He checked himself from intervening. There was clearly a great deal he had to learn about life in the Army. He parked his car and entered the guard room.

'Colonel's expecting you sir. Across the parade ground, into that building there sir, third door on your left, sir.'

They exchanged salutes and Gambit strode across the asphalt in what he hoped was a relaxed military manner. He passed quite close to where they were untying Private Jones from the gun carriage. He half expected to see the detail throwing cold water over the unconscious figure, or rubbing salt into the wheals on his body, in time-honoured tradition. Instead a medical orderly supervised his removal to the sick bay.

'Gambit.'

'Yessir.'

The Colonel had been staring at a huge map for at least a minute without looking at him. Suddenly he turned round.

'You are a lucky man to have been sent here.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Yes, with your record, you're lucky to be in the Army at all.'

'I wouldn't go so far . . .'

'Regimental funds appropriated.'

'Nothing has been proved sir.'

'Womanizing. Commanding officer's wife . . .'

'A slander sir.'

'Consistent insubordination.'

'A vendetta sir.'

'AWOL in Cyprus.'

'It was the carnival, sir.'

'Disobeyed orders in Aden.'

'Only to finish off some snipers, sir.'

'Altogether a despicable record. There's only one thing in your favour.'

'What's that, sir?' asked Gambit, his face composed in an eager expression.

'There's nothing in your record to suggest that you're a coward. A hard nut, but not a coward. We operate by different standards in this outfit.' Miller gestured out of the window, where the gun carriage was being cleaned. It had become muddy and blood-spattered.

'I've noticed that already, sir.'

'Discipline is all, Captain.'

'Hear, hear, sir,' said Gambit.

'And it will apply to you, too, Captain.

'Of course, sir.'

'Yes, we don't expect the men to do anything we wouldn't do ourselves in this regiment, Captain. And by the same token we are subject to the same sanctions. The gun carriage is not the extent of the punishments in this outfit. Not by a long way.'

'Good show.' Gambit was racking his brains to think of a punishment worse than the gun carriage.

'We shoot traitors.'

Gambit looked at the Colonel's aquiline face, with the one, piercing eye, and realised quite how apposite the name 'Mad Jack' was.

'Indeed, sir,' he said non-committally.

'What was good enough for Wellington is good enough for me.'

'Quite, sir.'

'Now, Captain, let's do a small tour of inspection. We are going to see some action tonight.'

'Marvellous. Can't wait sir.'

As they set off, Gambit tried to emulate the Colonel's practised military stroll, without much success.

Purdey was getting hungry. She could see nothing beyond the ammunition store. Even the sounds of the activity at the camp were muffled. She would have given a great deal for breakfast. On the other side of the ammunition store she heard the Colonel's voice.

'Ammo. Nothing much to see. All the big stuff's loaded for tonight.'

'Good show. And what's this here, sir?'

It was Gambit's voice, without a doubt, although sounding slightly strangled as though he were trying to impress his bank manager. And then he was gone. She felt a great sense of relief.

After their tour of inspection, the Colonel took Gambit out on to the parade ground. They stood right in the middle, surveying the whole camp and the airfield.

'Now, Captain Gambit, I have only a few minutes more to spare with you. You have come to us on a big day, but I see no reason why you should not take part. After all, greed and self-interest seem to have motivated your every action hitherto.'

'That's hardly fair, sir. Sometimes . . .'

'Greed. How does £20,000 a year sound to you?'

'Topping, sir.'

'That's the going rate for captains in my outfit. Plus danger money and a share of the profits. Not that I'm a socialist, of course. I simply like to run the thing on serious lines. We are a fighting force, with our own transport. We fight, Captain Gambit, wherever the need arises.'

'For money, sir?' said Gambit eagerly.

'For money. And this time for much, much more.'

'Mercenaries?' Gambit tried to sound ecstatic.

'Mercenaries. It's a dirty word these days. We like to

think of ourselves as professionals. While those gin-and-tonic soldiers at HQ go to cocktail parties, we are out fighting in the jungles and deserts.'

The Colonel was becoming quite fervent, when suddenly he caught sight of some men in Arab dress strolling across the parade ground, unaware that it was their colonel standing in the middle.

'Over here, on the double.'

They ran over to the Colonel.

'You men were walking.'

'Sorry sir.'

'Walking. Nobody walks in my regiment. You double, at all times.'

'Yessir.'

The Colonel struck each man across the face with his swagger stick. Gambit was amazed more by the fact that they did not flinch than by the fact that the Colonel should do it.

'Now get moving. I want that transport properly stowed.'

'Yessir.'

'Dismiss.'

They made a strange sight, their robes and burnouses flapping as they jogged towards the airfield, where four giant Hercules transports stood in a row. The Colonel turned to Gambit, pleased to have had an opportunity to demonstrate his power over the men.

'Slackers. They want the rewards but they sometimes forget reward entails effort. Trouble with the whole damn country these days.'

'I say, sir, what's the Arab get-up for?'

'Tonight, Mr Gambit, tonight we are off to the Gulf. This is our biggest operation yet. You will be privileged to see it.'

They were walking back to the main complex of buildings. As they passed the gun carriage, now installed behind

a white rope on a whitewashed square of concrete, outside the main door, Gambit gestured towards it.

'What was that man being punished for, sir?'

'Indiscretion. It costs lives. He was indiscreet with the enemy.'

'Enemy, sir?' Gambit looked around at the innocent English countryside.

'A young woman. A spy. Probably sent by one of those damn pinko newspapers. Can't take any chances, though, she's safely under lock and key now.'

'Quite right, sir.'

'Off you go, Gambit, get some sleep, we fly out at 18.00.'

'Thank you sir.'

When Gambit had gone in the direction of the mess, Miller called Bowden in.

'I think he's all right, Sergeant, but keep someone on him. We don't want any spies at this stage, do we?'

'No sir. Quite right sir.'

People soon got in the habit of saying 'quite right' to the Colonel. Bowden had been doing it for years. He called a corporal and told him to keep an eye on the new Captain.

'He does anything strange, you let me know.'

'What do you mean strange, Sergeant?'

'If he makes any phone calls, leaves the camp, pries around, that's what I call strange, Corporal.'

'Got you now, Sergeant.'

General Stevens had passed a terrible night. In the course of it, he decided that he might as well die bravely as be butchered and left in some souk. He had also finally realised that it was no use trying to order, bully, or bribe anybody. It was, after five years as a general, something of a shock to find that no-one was interested in what he had to say. He began to think like a trained soldier again, which, after all, was what he was. He resented the fact that Colonel Miller could treat him with such contempt. He

would show the Colonel who was a gin-and-tonic soldier. By morning he had managed to make a garotte from a piece of the light flex. He added an extra touch, a six-inch nail removed from a loose skirting board, and filed to needle sharpness by dint of much patient grinding on the metal frame of his bed. Nine-to-five soldier, indeed. He had been parachuting into Yugoslavia while Miller was still bullying younger boys at some minor public school.

When the nail was ready, he pressed the head of it through the flex, and then bound it securely with some bits of the copper wire. He waited patiently for his breakfast.

It finally came, born by the guard. He unlocked the door and pushed it open with his foot.

'Have you reconsidered?' asked General Stevens.

'Look sir, I told you, even if I wanted to, I couldn't help you.'

'But I'm a married man. I'm going to be retired next year. Knighted. It's unfair.' He allowed a sob to choke his voice. His head sunk on to his chest. As Private Baker put down his breakfast tray, feeling in truth a bit sorry for the old man who reminded him of his grandfather, the old man garotted him. The flex tightened round Private Baker's throat and the spike severed his spinal cord, which was a good thing because the General doubted he had the strength to hold a nineteen-year-old in his condition. The breakfast tray fell to the floor with a clatter. Stevens had to sit down with a pounding chest after putting the body, which still twitched rather unnervingly, into his bed. It was fully three minutes before he felt well enough to get up, take the man's FN rifle and keys, and lock the door of the storeroom from the inside while he considered his next move. In Yugoslavia he had never got close enough to any Germans to garotte them, though he was surprised to see that it worked just as they had been taught all those years ago.

He must get to a telephone, though there was no point in trying a call from the camp. All calls would surely be monitored. He unlocked the store room door and disguised unconvincingly as Private Baker, deceased, made his way towards the main entrance. There was no-one in the immediate vicinity. He returned and locked the storeroom door, and flung the keys behind some lockers. He checked the FN rifle, found that, contrary to all Army regulations, it contained a full magazine, and walked briskly towards a Land Rover which was parked tantalizingly close to the back of the stores.

Gambit, his new shoes pinching and squeaking, walked in the direction of the Officers' Mess. Instead of going in the door, he wandered about the camp, getting his bearings. It took him a very short time to establish that Miller had put a watch on him. Corporal Wilson had big noisy feet. Gambit returned to the Officers' Mess and ordered breakfast. He wondered where Purdey could be kept.

After breakfast he went to his quarters and stayed in his room for ten minutes. He slipped out of the back way, through the kitchens, and began his search for Purdey. Corporal Wilson waited at the front of the building, pretending to be painting white a row of stones already gleaming like small icebergs.

General Stevens started the Land Rover up without difficulty, and was not challenged until he reached the gate. The guard on the gate stepped out into the road with his clipboard as the General put his foot on the accelerator. The result was inevitable. The Land Rover made short work of the barrier as well. The General felt a considerable remorse at having killed two soldiers, British at that, within the space of an hour. It was two more than he had killed in his whole distinguished career. He felt, too, a strange elation as he headed down the lane towards the nearest

village. Just outside the village stood the remains of a huge elm tree, and beneath it a telephone box. The General stopped the Land Rover, and ran into the box. He searched his pockets for money, but there was none. He dialled 999.

'Emergency Service, what service do you require?'

'I don't want a service.'

'This is emergency – fire, ambulance or police. What is your location?'

'Military Intelligence.'

'What was that address, sir?'

'For God's sake woman, this *is* an emergency, give me Military Intelligence at GHQ.'

'You'll have to call the operator, sir. Ask for directory enquiries. This is emergency only.'

'All right, call the . . .'

General Stevens put the phone down and ran. Overhead a helicopter was circling ominously. He jumped into the Land Rover and fled, with the helicopter following. He knew enough about helicopters to know that it was a gunship, equipped with air to ground rockets which would make a nasty mess of his Land Rover. He raced towards the village, looking for a police station or some Army establishment where he could get in touch with GHQ. There was none. The village consisted only of two shops, a couple of rows of houses and a garage, abandoned. He turned down a lane, keeping under the cover of some beech trees, but the helicopter stayed remorselessly overhead. He took another quick turning to see if he could shake it off, but it altered course immediately and seemed to be following him even more closely. He must get back to a town or village before they got rid of him. Miller was capable of anything. The road ahead suddenly emerged from the woods and ran straight as a die across some downs. He stopped the Land Rover and backed into a farm gate on the edge of the woods. As the helicopter checked and circled, he scrambled into a ditch and cocked the FN rifle. He pushed the toggle to

fully automatic and waited until the helicopter made a pass at the Land Rover. Suddenly, before he could fire, it was as though the gates of hell had opened. The helicopter released a pod of rockets which blew a twenty-foot crater in the road and turned the Land Rover on its side. He would have to act more quickly. He waited until the helicopter turned, stabilized itself for firing and began its approach, then he squeezed the trigger. The glass of the helicopter's windscreen shattered, and as the pilot tried to pull it up and around it exploded. The rotor was still turning as the burning wreckage fell into a field. The General climbed out of his ditch and began to run down the road, hoping for a car to pass by. He was feeling terrible, but he jogged determinedly on. A car approached from the opposite direction, and he flagged it down. When the driver saw the bedraggled figure of the General, gun in hand, face blackened and uniform in tatters, he changed his mind and accelerated away. The General was exhausted. He waited by the side of the road for the inevitable police and army investigation.

'Get him. Get his body back here. And seal off the area quick. It will take the MOD police at least twenty minutes to get there. So you've got to move.'

Miller was furious. One old general had destroyed a helicopter and was still running loose over the countryside. If he got to a phone anything could happen. Land Rovers and helicopters were already sealing off the roads leading to the accident. He would have no trouble keeping the local police out on the pretext that the helicopter crash was covered by the Official Secrets Act. By the time they cleared it with their divisional HQ he should have the whole thing tidied up neatly. If he could get Stevens.

In fact the General presented no problem to the pursuers. They found his body lying beside the road a few

minutes later. He had suffered a massive heart attack and died, his FN rifle clutched securely in his hands by the spasms that shook him. He was lifted into a helicopter, flown back to the camp and loaded straight into one of the Hercules transports. The tailor had the unpleasant task of changing him into his number ones before the corpse stiffened.

Miller was pleased with his work. The only factor he had neglected was the motorist, who, although of a nervous disposition, was a public spirited man. He stopped at the next town and went into the police station to report that he had seen a helicopter crash and that an elderly man with a rifle had threatened him.

'How do you mean, threaten, sir?' asked the Sergeant.

'Well he waved the rifle at me and waved his arms.'

'An elderly man, you say, sir?'

'Yes. I didn't stop but I would say at least sixty odd.'

The Police Sergeant made a few calls.

'It's been reported sir. The Army are taking care of it. This is a military area, restricted most of it. Terrible accident it was. Thank you for coming in to tell us sir.'

'That's all right. I felt I should. Poor man.'

'Goodbye sir.'

The Sergeant pondered a while before ringing Military Intelligence. He felt that somebody should at least be notified of the survivor in case he was presumed dead.

He couldn't know that General Stevens was being packed in a crate at that moment.

'We can't just go barging in there because we suspect Miller to be up to something.'

'Quite,' said Steed. 'We'll have to wait until Purdey and Gambit confirm our suspicions. But we can take precautions.'

'We're ready. The Harriers from Boscombe are ready for take-off and a couple of helicopters are standing by. He won't get far.'

'Make a bit of a change, won't it, from your usual day, shooting down some of your own transport?'

'I don't think it will come to that.' Prentice did not seem pleased with the prospect.

'Now why do you imagine this Inniskilling Dragoon is wearing a shako instead of a busby?' asked Steed, surveying the battle of Waterloo again.

'Ah, I have the advantage of you, sir,' said Prentice. 'In 1808 guards officers gave up the busby and took to wearing the shako, plastron and epaulettes, as in this fine specimen here.'

'Fascinating. That is a 15th Hussar, is it not?'

'It is.' He was interrupted by the duty officer. 'Yes?'

'Message from incident control, sir, serious helicopter crash.'

'Is it being taken care of?'

'Yessir.'

'Well?'

'Well a policeman called to say that an elderly man was seen wandering around the countryside near the crash. Description tallies with General Stevens, sir.'

'Any more reports?'

'No sir.'

'Try to find the policeman and find out who reported seeing this man.'

'Yessir.'

After the duty officer had gone, Steed and Prentice decided to go and see for themselves the site of the accident. Prentice commandeered a helicopter and they set off over the countryside.

From the air it was clear that the whole area had been sealed off. They landed near the wreckage of the helicopter. A soldier came running up with a rifle.

'Restricted area, I'm afraid.'

He quailed when he saw the Major's credentials.

'I'll have to report this sir. The Colonel said no-one was to be allowed to enter the area.'

'Colonel?'

'Colonel Miller, sir.'

'Oh no need, we'll be off. Just a routine check,' said Steed.

When they were airborne, Prentice turned to Steed.

'Why did you do that? Hardly got a look at the place.'

'I don't think it would be a very good idea to arouse Miller's suspicions. Did you notice the crater in the road?'

'Yes, looked like rocket or cannon fire to me.'

'I thought so too. And look what I found.'

Steed handed Prentice a cartridge case.

'FN rifle ammunition. It looks as though someone shot the helicopter down.'

'It certainly does, Major. It does. What's that? Go in a bit closer.'

Below them on the back of a loader heading down a road away from the area, was the battered Land Rover.

'Damned funny helicopter crash, eh, Steed, cannon fire, one wrecked landrover and so on? What do you make of it?'

'Well, it could look, to the trained eye, as though the

helicopter were trying to stop the Land Rover, but got itself shot down instead.'

'It could.'

The radio crackled in their ears.

'Come in,' said Prentice.

'Located the civilian who spotted the old man, sir,' said the duty officer.

'Good work. We'll drop in on him. Give us the location.'

Gambit was not having much luck finding Purdey. He decided to try a more direct approach. He went back into the Mess, exited by the front door past Corporal Wilson, who was giving the stones their eighteenth coat of whitewash at the time, and headed in the direction of the ammunition stores. Corporal Wilson stood back to admire his handiwork, then picked up his bucket and followed at a discreet distance. He rounded the corner of one of the stores buildings, but there was no sign of the Captain. This would certainly fall into the Sergeant's definition of prying, so he crept along the side of the building to find out what was going on. Gambit hit him with enough force to stun him. The movement was so quick that Wilson could not even remember what had happened, except that he found himself on his backside looking up at Captain Gambit.

'You following me, Corporal?' asked Gambit pleasantly.

'No sir. Not really. Just keeping obbo.'

'You want to keep on your toes man, anything could happen.'

'Sorry sir. I'll be more careful next time.'

'Get up.'

Wilson got to his feet. He had a terrible ache in the back of his neck, but otherwise there was no serious damage.

'Yes, Corporal, follow a chap around like that and anything could happen. You could get killed.'

Wilson did not fail to notice the menace in Gambit's voice.

'Sorry sir.'

Wilson saluted, and attempted to about turn. Gambit grabbed him by the shoulder.

'No need to dismiss, Corporal. I'm going to make your job easier.'

'Yessir.'

'Yes, Corporal, you are going to come with me.'

'No need sir. I had better be running along. Lots to do sir, you know, painting and that.'

'Corporals don't paint, do they?'

'Sometimes, sir.'

'This isn't one of those times. Come along.'

The pressure of Wilson's arm was intense. He followed.

'Now what happens in here, Corporal? I'm very keen to know all about my new posting.'

'Nothing much in here, sir. Just stores.'

'And through this door?'

'More stores. Ammunition.'

'And behind this locked door?'

'Live ammo sir.'

'I would like to see that.'

'I don't have a key, sir.'

'Well we'll just have to get one, won't we?'

'If you say so sir.'

The sign on the door read HIGHLY EXPLOSIVE. DANGER.

Purdey heard Gambit's voice. She whistled loudly.

'There seems to be someone in there, Corporal.'

'Not likely sir. Not in there.'

Gambit whistled once, sharply. There was an immediate response.

'Where are the keys?'

'I haven't a clue sir. Oooh, aaah. In the guardhouse, sir.'

His voice was a little strained after the blow which winded him.

The Colonel's bad temper was getting worse. At least he had Stevens back and boxed up for the trip. But as sure as day follows night, they would have to deal with the MOD police and file hundreds of reports about the loss of the helicopter. Even as he thought about it, Bowden came in to his office.

'MOD investigators expected in two hours, sir. Routine stuff.'

'Right, make sure the Land Rover's out of the way. You've picked up the rocket launchers from the remains?'

'Yessir. Disposed of. Filled in the crater, sir.'

'Right, get that transport with the General's body up the far end of the runway. And load five tons of gear on top of it. I don't suppose they'll snoop around, but they may suspect something. And get that girl in here. I would like to know who sent her once and for all. If it wasn't a newspaper, I want to know who it was. We'll dump her over the Atlantic if we have to.'

'You don't think we should postpone ... ?' Bowden asked nervously.

'Don't be stupid. The Minister's expecting us tomorrow. The gold leaves the country for Switzerland on Friday. It's got to be today. Get that girl in now.'

'Yessir.'

Miller, despite his old-fashioned regard for women and their role, decided that he could not afford the luxury of being courteous to the girl any longer. The thought of her begging him for mercy stilled his anger for a moment. If he discovered that they were on to him, he would put Red Plan into operation. Nobody knew about this plan except Bowden and the Minister. It involved the apparent loss of the Hercules containing Miller, the gold and Sergeant Bowden from the radar screens of the world. The equip-

ment was installed and ready for use. He would disappear. He would be seen to have died carrying out some foolhardy operation on behalf of General Stevens. Whatever the suspicions of the top brass, nothing could be proved and he would never be traced to Umbezi.

The more he thought about it, the more attractive the prospect became.

Sergeant Bowden set off personally to get the girl. He took a pistol in case of trouble. As he entered the door of the armoury, he saw a strange sight. Gambit was pushing Corporal Wilson into a large ammunition box. He drew the pistol.

Gambit heard the cocking of the pistol. He looked up.

'Ah, Sergeant, I unfortunately hit this man, who was following me. I didn't realise . . .'

Gambit took the Sergeant's legs from under him with a kick. The pistol went off, but the shot buried itself in a pile of canvas awnings after ricocheting off the floor. Gambit kicked the sergeant in the stomach, and turned to face Wilson, who had climbed out of the box, eager for revenge. For the second time that day, Wilson got hit on the back of the neck, but the difference was that this time he stayed down. Just as Gambit went for the pistol someone shouted 'Freeze.'

He looked round. Three men were pointing automatic rifles at him.

'Right, lock him up,' said Colonel Miller.

'Really, Colonel, all your men keep attacking me.'

Miller hit him sharply. 'Swine. Double crosser. Scum.'

The Colonel was incensed. His one eye was burning unnaturally bright. He gestured towards the strong room.

'Lock them up together. And get a box ready. You're going to end up in the Atlantic together. Get up, Sergeant, get up.'

'Yessir.' Bowden struggled to his feet.

'And put this man on a charge. Useless devil.' He gestured at the figure of Corporal Wilson, which was still lying stretched out on the floor.

As Gambit was marched at gunpoint to join Purdey, Colonel Miller called Bowden aside.

'Red plan.'

'Yessir.'

'They're on to us.'

'Yessir.'

'But we've got a trump card if they try and stop us.'

'What's that?'

'In there, Sergeant, in there, we have two hostages. Once we get airborne we can throw them out.'

'We're doing well, aren't we?' said Purdey.

'Sorry. I was just about to get you out.'

'Promises promises. I haven't had any breakfast, you know.'

'No? You can't have had much of a night sleeping in here?'

'I didn't.'

'He's going to put us in the Atlantic.'

'What, and I haven't a thing for the beach.'

'In the middle. In a box,' said Gambit.

'Oh, well that's different. I won't need anything grand.'

'He's crazy.'

'Not really?' Purdey looked surprised.

'Yes, he flogs people, puts them on the rack, shoots them and is about to start a world war. That makes him crazy in my book.'

'Yes, I suppose it would. What's happened to the General?'

'I haven't even found the General yet.'

'Try not to blame yourself. We'll think of something.'

Gambit looked round the room. The door was about three inches thick of solid steel and there was no window.

'What do you propose? We dig our way out with my biro?'

'Tssk, tssk, Mike, don't get tetchy.'

The man who had spotted General Stevens identified him positively from Steed's photograph.

'Look, I'm terribly sorry I didn't stop. I thought he was going to shoot me.'

'That's all right,' said Steed, 'he was probably suffering from shock. You weren't to know.'

After he had gone, Steed and Prentice conferred.

'So Miller's got, or had, Stevens. What time are the MOD inspectors going in?'

Prentice looked at his watch. 'In about an hour. Why?'

'They are going to be joined by an extra inspector. Inspector Steed. Has a nice ring to it: I wonder what the pay's like?'

'All right. Good idea. Let me get you kitted up.'

'What do I need?'

'A few large clipboards for a start. I imagine they're civilian boffins on this sort of thing. I'll check.'

'I wonder what Gambit and Purdey are up to.'

Gambit and Purdey were doing nothing much, apart from staring gloomily at the wall.

'Cheer up,' said Purdey, 'it could be worse.'

'How?' Gambit wasn't very interested.

'They could be putting us in our box.'

As she said it a key turned in the lock and Sergeant Bowden, amply supported by five soldiers, appeared.

'Right. Time for you two to get into your box.'

Behind Bowden was a large crate.

'You were right,' said Gambit to Purdey, 'things could be worse, and they are.'

As they stood up, Purdey threw Bowden and Gambit flattened one of the soldiers, but they were overpowered

by sheer weight of numbers. Bowden's dignity was hurt.

'I hope you enjoyed that, because you're going to wake up dead next time anything exciting happens to you. Dead and wet. If you survive the fall from twenty five thousand feet.'

'Why don't you just shoot us now?'

'Because we may need you. We may need your live voices to keep certain people at bay, if you get my meaning.'

'Hostages,' said Purdey.

'That's the word I was looking for. Now, arms behind your backs, that's it. Tape over the mouth like this. What do you think of that?'

'Mmma aargh,' said Purdey faintly.

They were shoved into the crate which just had room for the two of them, and then they could hear the nails being driven in.

'Aaargh, mmhgh,' said Gambit, which was Gambit's attempt at 'we can't go on meeting like this.' The joke was lost on Purdey. They felt the crate being lifted on a fork-lift truck and carried out of the building, presumably, Gambit thought, in the direction of one of the Hercules transports. He was right. Their crate was stowed right next door to the one that contained the body of General Stevens, fully dressed in his ceremonial regalia.

Miller was in his office when Bowden reported back.

'All done?'

'Yessir.'

'Good. Now get all the accident reports out. The helicopter pilot hasn't any gunshot wounds has he?'

'No sir. His body's been checked. It's a bit of a mess, sir, anything could have happened.'

'Any witnesses?'

'I don't believe so sir.'

'Good. Well, what can the inspectors do, except the paperwork?'

'Nothing sir. The wreckage which wasn't sufficiently burnt has been properly incinerated and the Land Rover is in the body shop.'

'Good man. What time do you think we can get off?'

'We're scheduled for eighteen hundred, sir.'

'I know that. What I want to know now is how early we could get away.'

'About two hours before that, I think sir.'

'Right, well get transport to file a plan for an exercise at 1800 hours and tell Flight-Lieutenant Barker to come and see me.'

'Right sir.'

'And get the men acting normally until these bloody boffins get out of here.'

'Yessir.'

'One thing, Sergeant.'

'Yessir?'

'I hope you're looking forward to life in Umbezi.'

'Yessir. I am. With that sort of money I could live anywhere.'

The Colonel smiled. He was very fond of Bowden, although he would never have admitted it, even to himself.

He busied himself with his paperwork. There was a knock at the door.

'Come in.'

It was Flight-Lieutenant Barker, who wore a large RAF moustache, which irritated Miller whenever he saw it. But Barker was a loyal officer and a fine pilot.

'Right. Thank you for coming. We have a special request to test the secret equipment installed. So we'll be taking off two hours early on our exercise. Understood?'

'Yessir.'

'When the exercise is complete, you, and only you, will receive special instructions from me about our new destination and ETA. The other craft will proceed normally. Understood?' He handed Barker an envelope.

'Yessir.'

'In the event of a mishap, you will read these instructions which will tell you where to proceed. This is the most important mission we have ever flown. These orders are highly secret.'

'I understand sir.'

'Good. Dismiss.'

Miller always acted rather formally with his RAF people. He believed that the RAF was quite devoid of discipline.

A report came through from the gate.

'MOD inspectors here sir.'

'Thank you.'

The Ministry of Defence Inspectors were led by a retired Major-General, General Horrocks-Phillips, who was called out once in a while to investigate accidents and mishaps. He wore a brown tweed suit which smelt faintly of horse. Behind him came two other inspectors, technical experts in metal fatigue, aerodynamics, ballistics and subjects like that which were Greek to the Major-General and also to the fourth inspector, who wore a white coat and carried two very impressive clipboards, as though he were about to test aspirin in one of those ads. They were shown right into the Colonel's office.

'Ah Colonel. Most unfortunate. Most unfortunate. Do you mind if my chaps get on with it? You know, wander about, see the wreckage, talk to any witnesses.'

'No witnesses I'm afraid, sir. By all means.' He turned away. 'Sergeant Bowden.'

'Yessir.'

'Accompany these gentlemen on their tour of inspection.'

'I'm afraid you and I and your duty officer will have to fill in a lot of forms, Colonel.'

'Right you are. Well let's get on with it.'

Bowden led the inspectors to see the wreckage of the helicopter. The fourth inspector seemed more interested in the layout of the camp than the helicopter.

'Not my subject at all. I'll just wander about. Couple of things I want to look at.'

'I'll come with you.'

'No need Sergeant, no need. My speciality is the whole framework of an accident. The setting. Like to see the runways, wind directions, aircraft etc. Too technical to explain in detail.'

'Right you are sir,' said Bowden to Steed.

When Steed was out of sight, Bowden tried to get in touch with the Colonel, but the Colonel was locked in conference with the Major-General. He was torn between his desire not to upset the plans and his concern that Steed should stumble on something.

Gambit was struggling to get at the small, titanium steel knife he kept in his inside pocket. His hands were securely tied behind his back. If only he could get Purdey to help.

'Aaarghh,' he said.

'Whhaagh?' she replied.

In the dark they were packed together like chummy sardines; he turned his back to her and with his fingers tried to guide her hand inside his pocket. Purdey mistook his intentions for a moment.

'Nnghaargh.'

But Gambit insisted. Her hands closed on something. She understood now what he was getting at, and tried to say sorry, but it came out like a dog growling at a postman. She moved her back and inched her hands inside his jacket until she had the knife between her thumb and forefinger. It was contained in a small ivory sheath. Purdey pressed it into his hands. He held on to the handle, and she held the sheath. By moving his whole body, he was able

to slip the blade out. Then he set to work, gingerly, on cutting through the nylon cord which bound Purdey's hands.

Inspector Steed wandered out on to the tarmac. He looked at his stopwatch frequently, whistled loudly, and made notes on his clipboards. There were four Hercules transports lined up on the runway. He noticed the smell of aviation fuel, which always hung about after fuelling. The first transport was loaded with all the usual paraphernalia of an exercise: Land Rovers, field kitchens, ambulances and so on. He approached the second Hercules, but it was sealed up. As he tried to mount the steps up to the cockpit, Bowden came over in a jeep.

'Excuse me, sir, other inspectors want to move on, sir.'

'Right, just looking about. You going on an exercise?'

'Yessir. Usual thing, Nato support. Back tomorrow.'

'Jolly good. Now look here Sergeant, what's puzzling me is this: why would your helicopter pilot have set off in that direction if he was supposed to be heading for Winchcomb, as it says here?' Steed gestured towards his notes.

'Human error, sir. Human error. You've got to be pretty alert to pilot a chopper sir. That's my personal opinion.'

'True, true. Weather conditions – met report says – perfect visibility and flying.'

'Human error's a strange thing sir.'

Steed made notes in what he hoped whas a convincing manner. 'Right,' he said, 'that about does it. We had better be moving on. I want to look around the helicopter service bay, check on standards.'

'Yessir, follow me.'

Whatever it was they were hiding, Steed knew it was in one of the transports. He hoped it wasn't Purdey or Gambit; Gambit's car was in the car park outside the Mess.

Miller greeted him. 'Successful?'

'Hard to tell. Lots of analysis yet. I must see the helicopter service arrangements.'

'Your colleagues have already done that.'

'Ah, good. No harm in double checking, is there, Colonel?'

'No. Quite right.'

After the inspection, Steed and Prentice conferred.

'Well?'

'He's covered up well. I think he's got Stevens in one of the transports,' said Steed.

'See any sign of your people?'

'Only Gambit's car. The thing now is to cancel the Colonel's so-called exercise and move in just before he's due to take off.'

'I've checked his plans. He is supposed to leave for Cyprus at 1800. Flight plan's filed.'

'Let's be ready to move at a quarter to six, then.'

'1745.'

'Just as I said.'

'You don't think he'll start shooting, do you? Be a hell of a stink if a civil war breaks out. I've got two battalions on standby.'

'Well, the best possible thing would be for me to get in there, and try to do it quietly. If I could find Gambit and Purdey first. I don't want a war to break out with them as hostages on Miller's side.'

'No. And he's got the General.'

'Well Inspector Steed is not quite satisfied with his inspection. He's a terrible stickler for detail. Some of the forms aren't correctly filled in. Got to get back.'

'Take care.'

'Thank you, Major, a very kind thought.'

CHAPTER 6

It took Gambit more than an hour to free himself and Purdey from their bonds.

'Right, now I'll just push open this crate with my feet, like this . . . well, it shouldn't be difficult, I'll try again, here we go.'

Gambit braced himself against the sides of the crate and pushed for all he was worth against the crate with his feet.

'How are you getting on?' asked Purdey. 'Want any help?'

'Yes. I do. Let's try it together. One, two, three, heave.' Nothing happened. They lay in the dark pondering their next move.

'Has it occurred to you, Michael Gambit, that this crate we are in may be underneath a few tons of equipment—ammunition boxes and so on.'

'It has now.'

'Which would tend to suggest that we may not be able to get out.'

'This is true.'

'So what are we going to do?'

'Learn to live with it.'

'I still haven't had any breakfast,' said Purdey, plaintively.

'Hard luck. Where you're going, breakfast will be the last of your worries. You will be breakfast for some monster of the deep.'

'Thanks for those kind words.'

Gambit set to work hacking through the wood, inch by inch, on the top of the crate.

Inspector Steed's arrival caused something of a flurry at the gate.

'Sorry, sir,' said the man on the gate, 'but I am afraid we are on an exercise now. You can't come in.'

'Oh can't I? I'll have you know, my man, that I have the authority of the Commander, Land Forces, himself to investigate any military accident in any way I see fit.'

'I'll have to clear it with Colonel Miller, sir.'

'You do that.'

As the man picked up the telephone, Steed hit him in such a way that he sunk to the floor without a murmur.

'Tssk, tssk,' said Steed. 'Such a conscientious lad, too.'

Steed pulled his inert body into a storeroom and locked the door. The camp was a hive of activity. The four Hercules transports were the destination of much of the ferrying of equipment. Steed wandered boldly over the tarmac in the direction of the second transport.

'What are you doing, sir?' challenged a corporal as Steed walked up the loading ramp.

'Carry on, carry on. Just checking.'

'Right sir.'

The corporal looked doubtful but he continued with his work. Steed walked round the inside of the giant plane, whistling loudly. Jeeps, troop transports and guns were being loaded into this plane. There was no sign of Gambit or Purdey. Or, for that matter, the General. He sauntered down the ramp again, and stood making notes on his clipboard until there was a lull in the activity and nobody noticed him slipping over to the third, sealed plane which stood alongside.

'Right, Bowden,' said Miller, 'I want one good company to travel with us. C company. In case of accidents, we'll carry on alone.'

'But we can't take them all to Umbezi, sir,' said Bowden.

The Colonel was in no mood to be challenged. He turned sharply to Bowden.

'How many do you imagine will be left if we have to go in alone?'

'You mean, one company against the whole Army in Bazrah?'

Bowden was horrified. A regiment, acting swiftly and concertedly could pull it off, but a company had little or no chance. The whole operation had been planned meticulously. A company were to set up an artillery barrage, B company to create a diversion by a camel raid, and C company to surround the bank and hold off any resistance while they sprung the gold. Most of the company would be needed just to load the gold, let alone fight off the Arabs. Who would secure the plane and the airfield? Who would keep the fighters on the ground if they once did get the Hercules transports airborne? But he usually knew better than to voice his doubts.

'Right, sir.'

The Colonel stared at the map of the world, as if his restless gaze were searching for new ventures and challenges. Bowden had an idea.

'Why don't we just fly straight to Umbezi, sir, and forget about Bazrah this time, sir.'

Even as he said it, Bowden knew he had made a mistake.

'Sergeant, we have a dead general in our plane. We have a commitment to the Minister in Umbezi. We have a plan. I would never have suspected you of all people of cowardice.'

'You know it's not that sir.'

'Good, well that's the end of it. Get them hurried up. We take off at fifteen hundred.'

Steed pressed the button on the hydraulic doors to one of the loading bays. With a hiss it opened. He found himself in the lower compartment of the main body of the

plane. He whistled loudly, clambered up a short stairway and walked around the huge mounds of equipment, much of it now lashed in position and covered with tarpaulins. The interior of the plane was vast, like a church. Suddenly, faintly, he heard Mike Gambit calling out.

'Mike. Where are you?'

'Over here,' came the faint voice from beneath a pile of boxes and crates.

Steed got as close to the voice as he could. 'Is Purdey there? Is she all right?'

'I haven't had any breakfast,' said Purdey.

'Hard luck. Don't do anything silly now.'

'Thanks.'

'Where is this plane headed for?'

'I don't know. The Middle East,' said Gambit.

Steed, although he knew he would need at least three men to succeed, tried to claw his way to the crate. It was hopeless.

Steed looked round. So far no-one had followed him, but it couldn't be long now.

'Look, I'll get you out in a while. We've got them completely covered by radar. We won't let them get far. I just don't want to start a war. Take care of yourselves. I'll see you later.'

'What about my breakfast?' Purdey sounded genuinely concerned.

'I'll take you to the Ritz tomorrow.'

'Thanks.'

'One thing,' said Steed, 'you don't know where the General is, do you?'

'No. Sorry. Haven't seen him at all.'

'All right. Au revoir rather than adieu.'

'What's he talking about?' asked Gambit.

'I'm not sure,' said Purdey, 'but I wish he would hurry up. I'm getting very hungry.'

Steed made his way carefully back to the door. Just as

he got to the bottom of the ladder, the Corporal appeared.

'Colonel wants a word with you, sir.'

'Jolly good.'

'Now, sir.'

'Oh now. Right, well off we go, if you put it like that.'

The Corporal was pointing a rifle at Steed, which made his acceptance something of a formality.

Steed walked ahead of the Corporal over to the main block. He was shown straight in to the Colonel's office.

'Hello, Colonel,' said Steed, cheerfully.

'What exactly are you doing back here, Inspector?'

'I had a few lingering worries. Paperwork. We boffins have to fill in reams of the stuff.'

Colonel Miller turned away and looked out of the window in the direction of the parade ground.

'And that paperwork demanded that you go snooping round my transport?'

'Colonel, "snooping" is hardly an appropriate word for one of GHQ's inspectors.'

'Listen to me, you ghastly little civil servant. I'm a busy man. A very busy man. As far as I am concerned GHQ's paperwork is secondary to the business of running a unit of fighting men. Accidents happen. They will happen. But I can't allow myself to spend half my working day dealing with paperwork and snoopers like you, do you understand?'

'Colonel, it is considered unusual at GHQ that a unit should shoot down its own helicopters. It's considered unusual that rocket launchers be used on Land Rovers on the open countryside.'

'What are you talking about, man?'

'The evidence points that way, Colonel.'

Steed seemed to have deflected the Colonel's attention successfully from the question of what he was doing in the Hercules.

'Oh does it? Well why don't you wait until the official enquiry before presenting your evidence? You will now leave this camp. If I see you again, you'll be arrested. Understood?'

'Yes indeed.'

'Sergeant, escort the Inspector off the camp. He is not to be re-admitted under any circumstances. Put the man on the gate on a charge.'

Steed drove off down the road. As soon as he was out of sight of the camp, he accelerated to maximum speed in the car borrowed from Prentice. He must get at least a division in there before the madman did something even more foolish. They only had a few hours.

'Did you put the man on a charge?' asked the Colonel.

'Couldn't find him sir. I've sent another man down to the gate,' said Bowden.

'He was no civil servant. Military Intelligence more like. How long to get the first transport in the air?'

'Fully loaded with C-Company, sir, about ten minutes.'

'Right. Get them aboard. We're off now. Red Plan. We go to Bazrah alone. I want all the transport in the air. They'll intercept the others but if we can get up now they'll never trace us. The new equipment will see to that. Get moving.'

Bowden, his heart heavy, gave the alert. Men began to run from all directions to form up on the parade ground. The engine of the first Hercules coughed for a moment and then roared, the noise almost drowning Bowden's command. They were a motley collection, some in Arab outfit, some in commando camouflage, and others with parachutes already on their backs.

Purdey and Gambit felt the vibration of the huge engines starting up. Soon they could hear the sound of feet as C-Company filed aboard. The men climbed up a short

stairway to a passenger compartment, lined with uncomfortable canvas and metal frame chairs, where each man had his appointed seat. They hung their rifles behind them on hooks, and strapped themselves in for take-off.

'Looks like Steed may be a bit too late,' said Purdey.

The plane began to move forward.

'It does.'

'Throw the man and the girl out as soon as we get off France,' said the Colonel.

'Do you want me to use the radar deflector now sir?' asked the Flight-Lieutenant.

'Of course I do. Set a course south by south west, the rest of the wing to proceed as planned.'

'Right sir.'

Barker spoke into his intercom in that drone that Air Force people use. The Hercules lumbered down the runway. Behind, the other three followed, like giant toys. For a plane of such bulk, the Hercules took off with surprising ease.

At Boscombe, as soon as the radar screen registered three Hercules transports in the air, the scramble signal was given. Ten Harriers rose into the air and raced to intercept the Hercules. Steed was still on the road when they passed overhead, travelling four times as fast as the transports, their wings only just clearing the tops of the trees.

'Poor old Purdey, no breakfast,' said Steed to himself as he tried to squeeze the last few miles an hour out of his borrowed car.

He turned into the gates of Military Intelligence HQ, flew up the drive and met Major Prentice. Before he could get out of the car, Prentice gave him the news.

'They've taken off. Three of them, anyway. I've got Foster's lot moving in; the old boy's determined to give them a roasting for trifling with his niece.'

'She'll be all right,' said Steed, although he really could not have explained his confidence if he had been required to.

'Yes, if we can get them down without shooting.'

'Let's go and see.'

Steed and Prentice jumped into a helicopter, the pilot pulled back the stick and they were off in the direction of the coast. Reports flooded in to their earphones. It seemed that the Harriers had made contact with the Hercules and were ordering them to return to base. Foster's division had moved in to Colonel Miller's camp and were taking up position all around to seal it off.

The helicopter pilot, flying at great speed, soon made visual contact with the Hercules transports, which were flying in big circles, confused, as they had lost all link with their commander, about what they should do. Eventually, in the absence of any other orders, they obeyed the Squadron Leader commanding the Harriers and turned, in an arc that took them right out over the Channel, back towards their base.

'Orders obeyed, sir.'

The report came in on the headphones.

'Right take her back to the 19th's camp.'

'That's one stage successfully concluded,' said Steed.

'I just hope he doesn't start shooting. He's crazy enough.'

'Can't really, can he, with a division surrounding the airfield?'

'Who knows?'

The helicopter, flying low at speed, arrived above the camp at about the same time as the fighters, escorting the transports in formation. There was some confusion, because the control tower was clearly not operational, but eventually the first Hercules touched down. Prentice was elated. 'Come out without your weapons and form up on the parade ground.'

The second Hercules touched down, just as the doors of the first opened.

'There's just one thing, Major,' said Steed, 'sorry to spoil your fun.'

'What's that?'

'There are only three Hercules transports. This afternoon there were four.'

'Oh my God.'

The third transport landed. It rolled to a halt behind the other two. Immediately the doors opened and the men began to disembark. They formed up neatly alongside their fellows. They were all unarmed.

'Keep out of sight, Colonel,' said Prentice to Colonel Foster, 'it doesn't look as though there is going to be trouble. Take her down.'

Steed and Prentice inspected the troops. There was no sign of Miller, nor of C Company.

'Where are the rest of them?' Prentice asked.

There was silence.

'Well? There's a whole Company missing. A whole Company and a transport. Get that Squadron-Leader on the radio. And search each of these Hercules minutely. Every inch. Do you understand?'

'Yessir.'

'Dismiss these men to their quarters, Sergeant-Major. No-one is to leave the camp.'

'Squadron-Leader standing by sir.'

Prentice went to the helicopter to speak to the Squadron-Leader.

'You've lost one, Squadron-Leader. You've lost a Hercules.'

'Don't think so Major. I'll just check. No, only three reported as taking off by control.'

'Four took off.'

Impossible, Major. Sure you aren't imagining things?'

'I am not imagining anything. Get after it.'

'Where to, sir? We have no radar contact. No sightings reported.'

'Alert every airfield in the country. Alert every base abroad. Particularly Cyprus.'

At this point Foster came speeding over in his staff car.

'Any sign of that beggar Miller?'

'Afraid not, Colonel,' said Steed, 'we seem to have mislaid him.'

'He'll wish you had mislaid him when I get hold of him. Where's my niece?'

'Ah, well at the moment we are not sure.'

Colonel Foster stared in disbelief at Steed. His face changed colour as rapidly as a sheet of litmus paper. It went from its habitual purple to a pleasing shade of puce.

'Don't know? Don't know? What sort of answer is that?'

'The truth, I am afraid. Miller has her in a Hercules somewhere which is heading at this moment for the Middle East.'

'The Middle East. The Middle East? It's a big place, you know.'

'I do. In fact I am not sure if he is heading for the Middle East.

Foster looked around wildly, as if hoping to see a cavalry brigade with which he could charge the Middle East.

An orderly came running up to Prentice.

'Men seem to have no idea where they were headed, sir, except that it was somewhere hot, with camels.'

'Wonderful.'

Prentice looked a trifle rattled.

'Wonderful,' he repeated, that includes only thirty-two countries at the last count. Let's hope that our depleted Air Force can find them before they start World War Three. Come on, there's nothing we can do. Let's go and have a drink.'

'Something to be said for that,' said Colonel Foster, his

face lightening perceptibly in colour as they strode towards the Mess.

'Quite,' said Steed, but he was wondering when Miller would throw Purdey and Gambit out.

'Right,' said Colonel Miller to Bowden. 'Throw them out. Take a couple of men and just push the crates out of the parachute door.'

'Are you sure, sir?' Bowden asked nervously.

'What the hell's the matter with you? Have you gone lily-livered?'

'No sir, it's just that we may need them at some stage.'

'No we won't. They're no use to us in Bazrah and precious little good to us in Umbezi. Throw them out. Or you will go with them.'

'Yessir.'

Bowden was a brave man, but he knew that what Miller was proposing was suicidal. There was something about the Colonel in his flying kit which suggested a Kamikaze to Bowden. But he knew that argument was not merely useless, but dangerous as well.

He went down from the flight deck to find two men to help him.

'I should think they'll be coming for us at any minute,' said Gambit.

'Mike, have you ever thought of going into something a little less exciting? A new line of work?'

'I have. I would like to resign now. Do you think anyone will take any notice?'

'I doubt it. Imagine dying on an empty stomach, too. It's just not fair.'

'When they move the crate out into the open, I'll give the word. We've got to move fast. Very fast.'

'Right. Hello, here they come.'

They could hear the sound of boxes and crates being moved, despite the roar of the engines. Bowden was shouting bad-temperedly at the other two men.

'Come on, hurry up, we'll have crossed the bloody Channel soon. That's it, get that box off.'

Purdey and Gambit could now see a little light through the chinks in the crate. Then the crate began to move.

'Right, open the doors and hold on tight, there will be a hell of a blast,' said Bowden.

'Now,' said Gambit, kicking the top off the crate.

Purdey's legs shot out and she seized Bowden's neck between her legs. Gambit chopped one of the men just as he opened the parachute exit and out he went; the second man reached for his rifle, but Gambit took a flying kick at him which threw him ten feet across the plane. He came to an abrupt halt when his head struck an armoured personnel carrier. Bowden was beginning to choke.

'Want any help?' asked Gambit.

'No thanks, I can manage.'

Bowden sank, inert, to the floor of the plane. Purdey vaulted nimbly out of the crate, dusted herself off and pulled her dress back round her thighs. Just as Gambit was turning the handle to close the parachute door, Bowden got off the floor and lunged for him. Gambit stepped aside, jerked Bowden's arm, and the Sergeant was sucked out of the door.

'I was beginning to like him,' said Gambit. 'Salt of the earth.' He shut the door.

'What are we going to do with him?' asked Purdey, gesturing at the remaining soldier.

'Why, put him in a box, of course.'

Purdey and Gambit tied and gagged the soldier and began to prise open a crate. In it lay a figure.

'General Stevens,' said Purdey.

'He looks dead.'

'He is dead,' said Purdey after a moment's inspection. The General's body, in full uniform, was laid out on the bottom of the crate.

'What on earth do you imagine they were going to do with him?'

'Honestly,' said Purdey, 'nothing Miller could think of would surprise me. Perhaps they are going to ransom him or something.'

'Or use him as a scapegoat, more likely,' said Gambit.

'Anyway, let's put this fellow out of the way here, while we decide what to do next.'

'Any reports of the plane?' Steed asked Prentice.

'No. No-one knows what could have happened to it. It's absolutely disappeared off the face of the earth.'

Prentice sat down. As he did so, an orderly came into the mess.

'Yes?'

'We've searched the three transports, sir. No sign of the General or the two missing persons, sir.'

'Well, Major, there's nothing we can do now except wait.'

'True, Steed, but we can do it with a brandy and soda, can't we?'

CHAPTER 7

Colonel Miller, his face stern, preoccupied with his plans and charts, sat bolt upright in his seat.

'How much longer, Barker?' he asked suddenly.

'Three hours and ten minutes, sir.'

'Fuel be all right?'

'Should just do it sir.'

'Any sign of an air search?'

'Nothing sir. We will have to skirt Cyprus, but the deflector seems to have thrown them off.'

'Good. Sergeant.' He paused. 'Where's Sergeant Bowden?'

'Not come back, sir,' said one of the men.

'Go and get him.'

'Right, sir.'

'Now, Barker, when we get to our destination, I want you to refuel as soon as possible. Our exercise will take not more than fifty minutes. In this envelope are our new orders. You will open them and set course only if I do not return after time. Understood?'

'Yessir.'

'Now where's Bowden?'

'That seems to have done it,' said Purdey. The mechanism of the door to the transport hold had taken no time to jam. It was hydraulically operated, with the electrics on their side.

'Just for good measure, I'll do this lock up here.'

Gambit fastened a chain, with a huge security lock, through the iron handle of the door and made it fast to the turret of a Ferret armoured car.

'Well, 'said Purdey. 'Now they can't get in, but how are we going to get out?'

'Let's take these things one at a time. I wouldn't say they couldn't get in, as it happens, but they won't be able to shoot holes in that door in mid-air.'

'Sssh. Someone's there.'

A soldier was hammering on the door.

'Sergeant, Sergeant, Colonel wants you.'

'Door's stuck. Tell the Colonel. Can't open it.'

'What,' yelled the voice from the other side.

'Door's stuck,' yelled Gambit.

'You ever thought of being a Sergeant-Major?' asked Purdey quietly.

'What did you say?' The man on the other side had an even stronger voice than Gambit's.

'The bleeding door's stuck.'

'Down on your luck? Aren't we all, Sergeant, aren't we all?'

'The door is stuck. Stuck. Jammed.' Gambit was bellowing.

'Got you now Sarge. OK. I'll tell the Colonel.'

The battle of Isandlhwana, long a favourite of Steed's, was holding no attraction for him. He moved his Zulu impis mechanically against Prentice's Redcoats. He just wished he could do something. Anything.

'Another glass of port, Steed?' asked Prentice.

'No thanks old chap. No news from Cyprus? No clue at all?'

'No, nothing. We've interrogated the men. They all say only the Colonel ever knew about a mission.'

'Oh do they? What about the man who had been on the gun carriage? Anybody talk to him?'

'No. Shall we see him?'

'I think we should. It's not much, but it is something, isn't it?'

'True. He's in the military hospital. Let's go.'

'I'll just move young Dinizulu up here like that, that's it, now not even Michael Caine can save you.'

'You rotter.' Prentice was fond of expressions like that.

'Always attack when the enemy's defences are relaxed. Rule one, page one of the handbook.'

Steed was clearly feeling more cheerful. They set off for the hospital in Steed's car, the big Jaguar Special. The hospital had been warned of their arrival. The administrator himself greeted them.

'I'm afraid the man you want to see is unconscious.'

'Well,' said Prentice, 'let's just go and see if he wakes up.'

'Now look here, this is a hospital.'

'A military hospital,' said Prentice sharply. 'Between you and me, a great deal could depend on this. For instance the future of the world as we know it. So show us the way.'

The Administrator thought Prentice quite probably the biggest liar in England, but he quickly led the way to the room where Private Terry Jones lay recovering from his ordeal. The doctor in charge suspected that he had dislocated two or three vertebrae and torn five ligaments. His ribcage was a mass of torn cartilage and crushed bone.

'He'll be laid up for three months at least. I still don't know if there's any internal damage. Do you know how this happened? I've never seen anything like it.'

'We are investigating, Doctor. This is Mr Steed.'

'How do you do.'

They exchanged pleasantries.

'Could you leave us with your patient for a moment.'

'Well, he's not conscious, but he has had occasional conscious periods.'

'Right, well if you don't mind, we have to be alone with him. Security.'

Steed smiled apologetically as he said it.

'Of course,' said the doctor, 'but please call me if his situation changes at all. He is under twenty-four-hour watch.'

'Thank you.'

Steed and Prentice moved closer to the bed. Jones lay, ashen-faced, completely still.

'Jones,' said Steed softly but insistently. 'Jones. Where's Miller heading for?'

There was no response. Steed and Prentice sat down very near the bed.

'What in hell do you mean, jammed?' The Colonel's voice rose above the roar of the engines. 'Jammed?'

He turned towards Barker.

'Can a door like this jam, Flight-Lieutenant?'

'Could do, sir, but I have never known it happen before.'

'How do we open it?'

'Can be done manually, sir, there are special jacks for jammed hydraulic gear.'

'Get them out. I want to know what's going on in there. Get some oxy-acetylene cutters if necessary.'

'I wouldn't advise that, sir,' said Barker quietly, 'there would be one hell of an explosion and then we would never know what was going on.'

Three men were detailed to get the jacks out.

'And I want them backed up with FN rifles.'

'Sir, if shooting develops, we will all be in trouble.'

'Well can't we get down to a reasonable height so that it doesn't matter if the fuselage is pierced?'

'If we lose height now, sir, I doubt it we'll reach Bazrah at all.'

The Colonel pondered his predicament for a moment.

'Right, get the jacks out. When we land, force the door and shoot them!'

'Shoot Bowden?' One of the men looked puzzled.

'I don't think Bowden's still in there.'

Barker eyed his fuel gauges anxiously.

'Why don't we just land in Cyprus, sir?'

Mad Jack's look told him why. This was the Colonel's final mission, one way or another. Barker concentrated on flying the Hercules as economically as possible. Not for the first time today, he wished he had never met the Colonel. But Barker had developed expensive tastes in the Colonel's employ. There was no going back to being an ordinary Flight-Lieutenant. It was his final mission, too.

'How long until we land, Barker?'

'Two hours and six minutes, sir, if the headwinds don't get up as we approach land.'

The Colonel looked out of the window of the aircraft. The horizon was still brightly lit, but below them the clouds were dark with occasional glimpses through them to the inky black of the sea. Below them somewhere to the north lay Cyprus. The Colonel looked at the radar, but no solid lumps disturbed its swirling, electronic face.

Purdey and Gambit had turned the gun mount of one of the Ferrets round to face the door.

'That'll give them a nasty shock.'

'If we can find the ammo for it.'

'Only twenty more boxes to look through.'

'This is no fun on an empty stomach,' said Purdey.

'I'm very fond of you, Purdey, but I do wish you would stop talking about food.'

'I'm having fantasies. Apple pie and cream. Large breakfast with pork sausages and eggs. My mind is going.'

'Aha. This looks like it.'

Gambit drew a sheath of machine-gun rounds from a box.

'All we have to do now is find out how to load them.'

'Then we can blow the whole plane to kindgom come,' said Purdey. 'It's just that I don't understand what that would achieve.'

'I'm working on it. Now let's get the gun loaded, anyway.'

Private Jones stirred in his painful, drugged limbo. His eyes opened.

'I'm sorry Colonel Miller. Sorry.'

'It's not Colonel Miller, Jones, we're friends.'

'Don't throw me out, sir, give me another chance, please.'

His eyes struggled for focus.

'Where's the Colonel, Jones, you must tell us,' said Prentice.

It was no good. Jones mumbled for a while and then lost consciousness.

'There's one thing that may work,' said Steed.

'What's that?'

'For God's sake don't tell the doctor.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Pretend to be Miller.'

They whispered for a while, as Steed explained what was to be done. Steed and Prentice walked to the door. Prentice stamped hard on the floor.

'Atten-shun. Colonel Miller. By your beds.'

Jones stirred and tried to move. 'I'm sorry, Colonel.'

'Don't talk unless spoken to, Private,' snapped Prentice

'Yessir.'

'Now, Jones, tell the Colonel where we're going. You don't want to be left behind, do you?'

'Bazrah, sir, please take me.'

'Call the doctor to him,' said Steed, already running. In the corridor he knocked a nurse over, and only had time to doff his bowler, but not to explain.

'One hour to go, Colonel,' said Barker. 'We'll just make it.'

'The airfield at Bazrah runs east to west. I want the plane pulled up as far from the terminal building as possible. There is only likely to be one light armoured vehicle there, which we will knock out as soon as we land. First we have to deal with whatever is going on in there,' he gestured towards the hold, 'then we get moving as quickly as possible. You get the plane re-fuelled by whatever means you can, be ready to take off straight from taxi position, and get her up quickly. If I come back I'll tell you where to go. If I don't, as I've said, read your orders. Understood?'

'Yessir.'

'Right, now I'm going to brief the men.'

Miller moved towards the compartment where the men were lined up in their seats. The chatter stopped as soon as Miller appeared.

'This is an important mission, men. We're on our own. Just C Company. We're going to deal with a handful of Arabs, shouldn't be much trouble for men like you. But you must move fast. I promise you that you'll all be as rich as Croesus if this mission is successful.'

The men were still stunned by the news that the other three companies would not be with them.

'Right, paras get ready to jump. You will land on the football pitch in the town, which is only a few hundred yards from the bank. Secure it until transport arrives from the airfield with the equipment. We've practised this exercise many times.

'Yeah, with four companies,' said a young soldier even as he pulled the straps of his parachute over his shoulders.

'Now we'll see if you've got anything more than talk inside you. By the way, you'll be jumping from the emergency exit, not the parachute door.'

They all knew what that meant. Any updraft would

carry them against the tail plane and beat their brains out.

'Flight-Lieutenant Barker will put her in a slight roll.'

'When do we jump, sir?'

Miller looked at his watch.

'Forty-two minutes exactly.'

He turned as he got to the door.

'Good luck, men. You won't need it if you do it right.'

'Not half,' said the young soldier, Private Barnes, under his breath. 'Not half.' He was only nineteen, but this was his third mission under the Colonel. The other two had not required him to jump out of an aeroplane into an unknown town with only twenty other men, that was the difference.

The Supreme Commander, Land Forces, was playing squash when Steed and Prentice arrived. He was serving at eight two up against his aide, a much younger man. He didn't want to miss the opportunity, but Steed and Prentice simply ran on to the squash court.

'Good God. Quickly.'

He began to run as soon as he had heard their news. Steed and Prentice followed him.

'Red alert,' he shouted at his aide, who was red in the face, as if in anticipation.

They ran to the main communications centre.

'Get me the Prime Minister, immediately.'

The communications centre was a huge circular room, with TV, radio, telephone, cable, telex and radar communication with every unit in the country and abroad. It also had direct links to Whitehall, Nato headquarters, Shape headquarters, and even a line to the Warsaw Pact headquarters, to be used in the event of an unauthorised or accidental nuclear explosion. Banks of computers glowed and hummed.

'While you're on to the Prime Minister, get me the

Chief of Staff of the Bazranian Army. Yes, and get every plane in Cyprus in the air at once.'

'Ah yes, Prime Minister, a hijacking, one of our men appears to have gone crazy. Mad, sir. He has hijacked a plane and is heading for Bazrah. Yessir. We will try to intercept, but he has hostages. They should surround the airfield, yessir, and we will lend support. I have called up A-flight from Cyprus. Yessir. Air to ground. If there's any shooting to be done, I think you should ask the Sultan – er Prince – quite, sir, I think you should ask him to let our chaps do it. About forty minutes, sir. Yes, that's all. I'm speaking to the Prince's nephew sir, Chief of Staff, yes one of my pupils at Sandhurst. Yessir. Goodbye Prime Minister.'

'I have General Mahmoud Ben Said on the line, sir.'

'Thank you. Ah, Freddy, how are you. Yes jolly good, no time for gossip now I'm afraid. No, no polo.'

The Commander Land Forces looked around, embarrassed.

'No it's just that one of our chaps has gone a bit crazy and is proposing to land in your capital. Yes, a Hercules. Surround the airfield with everything you've got, but don't fire. I'll send my chaps to sort it out. Yes I know you've got the latest equipment, but this is no time to try it out. Promise me Freddy. Good. Don't listen to a word the man says on the radio. We'll deal with him. Miller, Colonel Miller. Thirty-eight minutes. Approximately.'

The General put down the phone.

'Silly fellow doesn't know a Hercules from a Cessna. Probably blow the bloody thing to bits as soon as it lands. Oh well.'

'Where's that wing from Cyprus?'

'Within an hour of Bazrah, sir.'

'Well I hope he doesn't start shooting, there are at least a hundred soldiers on board and two of Steed's colleagues,' said Prentice.

"Let me talk to the Wing-Commander direct.'

'Yessir.'

The Wing-Commander's voice could be heard and his co-ordinates flashed on a television screen simultaneously.

'Wing-Commander Whitehead, A-Flight.'

'This is the Commander Land Forces speaking. I want you to stand by to destroy a Hercules of 19th Commando at Bazrah airport if you get the word. You are to stay in the air and circle the airport until you get my orders. Understood?'

'Yessir. Over and out.'

The voice was surprisingly clear considering it was in a MRCA at the other end of the Mediterranean.

'Get me the Marshal of the Air Force.'

Purdey and Gambit could hear the tramp of feet above them as the paras lined up ready to jump.

'They'll be making a surprise attack, then this lot will land and go in, I imagine,' said Gambit.

'And before they do that, they're going to have to come in here for their transport,' said Purdey.

'When they do that, we fire the machine-gun.'

The plane began to slacken in speed.

'They'll be going down to optimum jumping height,' said Gambit.

'You seem to know a lot about it.'

'You forget, I was in the Army.'

'This morning. Terrific.'

'There are many things you don't know about me. One day . . .'

The plane began to roll sharply, cutting Gambit off.

'There they go.'

They could hear the shouted commands faintly.

The second man to go timed it badly and hit the tail

plane. The third, Private Barnes, was spattered in a fine driving mist, by his blood. The night was warm. He allowed himself to free fall a good long way, further than the regulations because he had no desire to present too good a target. Below him he could see the first parachute. He pulled the ripcord and began to aim his descent at what he hoped was the football pitch. The first man ignited his flare to guide them down. He just hoped Bill knew where the football pitch was, too. He looked up. His chute was shaping beautifully. He felt the excitement rise. The Colonel wouldn't let them down. Suddenly he saw a square of bright light below him. Someone had turned the lights on on the football pitch. Just his luck to arrive in the middle of football practice. There was nowhere else to land. He sailed down almost on to the centre spot, to find himself surrounded by a thousand wild looking desert troops. Bill had sensibly put down his FN rifle and put up his hands. He unhooked his parachute and did the same. Above them, the remaining lads all came down to a perfect landing in the still, warm air.

'Evening all,' said Corporal O'Neill, 'any seats for the game?'

Barnes began to laugh hysterically, even though he was terrified at the same time. They were lined up and marched into the back of an Army truck.

'Hands across the ocean,' said O'Neill, 'Parachute display. You like?'

'Right,' said Miller, 'all out? Lose any?'

'Just one sir.'

'Take her down as quickly as you can, then get the jacks going and into the transport as arranged.'

Barker passed over the airfield, where a few landing lights were on, turned sharply and brought the huge plane down deftly towards the ground. He steadied her, throttled back and engaged the air brake.

Suddenly the whole airport was illuminated by searchlights and headlights.

'Take her up, take her up,' bellowed the Colonel.

'Too late sir, we're almost out of fuel.'

'Doesn't matter, take her up.'

'Impossible.'

Barker brought the plane down smoothly, and immediately the headlights began to move, following the plane, until she stopped. They stopped, encircling her in a pool of light.

'Kill the lights. Lie down.' Miller bellowed into the intercom.

There was no immediate response from outside the aircraft.

'Get in touch with the control tower and tell them we're out of fuel and forced down.'

'This is Delta Five Tango, come in control.'

'Control.'

'Request permission to re-fuel, control, we are 19th Special Commando forced down on exercise.'

A very cultured voice came on the radio.

'Why didn't you use your radio to warn us, Captain?'

'Malfunction, control.'

'Tell Colonel Miller not to do anything silly. This is General Ben Said, C-in-C Bazranian Forces here. You are to do nothing, make no move whatsoever. You are completely surrounded. I have ordered my men to shoot if you make the slightest move. Is that clear?'

'Yessir,' Miller replied.

'Some of your chaps will be along later,' said the General in a very plausible Sandhurst drawl, except that he rolled the 'r' very vigorously.

They'll be along any second,' said Gambit.

'What's going on, I wonder.'

'Nothing, by the sound of it.'

The huge plane was uncannily quiet. No men moved about, and the giant engines were quite still. The lights went out suddenly, too.

'Here, I'll turn the lights on the Ferret on,' said Purdey, 'at least we'll be able to see if anyone is trying to get in.'

Gambit kept the gun pointing at the door.

'I wish something would happen. I am going to die of starvation soon,' said Purdey.

CHAPTER 8

The huge plane stood on the runway, flooded with light from all sides. General Ben Said brought up his latest weapon, a missile which could be launched by one man, and positioned it so that it would strike the Hercules just behind the flight deck if necessary. He also ordered up his new supply of Chieftain tanks and some snipers. He was sorely tempted to shoot out the plane's tyres, but resisted the temptation.

'Right,' said the Commander-in-Chief, Land Forces, 'they have the plane surrounded. Now what do we do? You know the man.'

'I think we should ask him to surrender, sir,' said Prentice.

'I doubt if he'll do that,' said Steed, 'more likely to shoot himself or someone else first. No, I think we should wait until the fighters get there and see what he wants to do next. After all he still has a couple of platoons and a lot of weapons on board, not to mention two hostages.'

'Or three, if he has General Stevens. And Noble.'

'What do we do now, sir?' asked Barker.

Miller sat quite still for at least a minute.

'We fly to Umbezi.'

'Umbezi? We haven't got any fuel, sir.'

'I know that. We will get some. They aren't going to destroy this plane with a general and two other hostages on board, are they?'

Miller spoke to control. 'Could I speak to the General, please?'

'General Ben Said speaking. Over.'

'General, I would like to re-fuel and take off.'

'Can't do that old boy. Terribly sorry. Anyway, what about your paras. We have them awaiting collection. Over.'

'General, don't play games with me. I have three hostages on board this plane, including a British General. I shall not hesitate to shoot them one at a time until you accede to my request for fuel.'

'It's out of my hands, Colonel. I have been asked by your C-in-C not to let you move. Sorry. If you open a door or move the plane we will let you have it. Bang, boom. I have two Sidewinder Missiles trained on you even now. I personally am dying to see if they were worth the money.'

Miller sat deep in thought for a while.

'We only have one card to play, Flight-Lieutenant. Let us wait until some boffin from the Air Force or some tin pot clerk gets here. They'll send someone along to do the negotiating. In the meanwhile we sit tight.'

Miller got up and went to the door separating the hold from the rest of the plane. 'Gambit. Gambit.'

Mike Gambit wondered if the Colonel was bluffing when he heard his voice. He decided that he probably could not be sure.

'Yes?'

'What have you done with Bowden?'

'I've got him here as a hostage. Tied up.'

'I see.'

'Good.'

'Well, I'll do you a swap. You let Bowden go and you and the girl can get out of here without injury.'

'Where are we?'

'In Cyprus.'

Gambit looked at his watch. 'Not likely, I'm afraid,' he whispered to Purdey.

'Ask him to send in some sandwiches,' she said quickly.

'Cyprus,' said Gambit. 'What are we doing here?'

'On exercise, of course,' said the Colonel. 'Nato support.'

'How do we know you're not bluffing?'

'You don't. But it's your only chance.'

'Let me think about it. Just in case you get any ideas, I warn you that there's a heavy machine-gun pointing at the door.'

'I see.'

'Well come back in ten minutes for my decision.'

'Our decision,' said Purdey loudly.

'Our decision,' agreed Gambit.

They moved away from the door.

'He just wants to get us out of here so that he can get on with whatever it is he wants to get on with. Do I make myself plain?' asked Purdey.

'Yes, in a funny sort of way.'

When the Colonel arrived back on the flight deck, Barker handed him his headset.

'There's a Wing-Commander Whitehead for you sir. He's got a wing of MRCAs above the airfield.'

Whitehead identified himself.

'C-in-C asked me to tell you that you are completely covered. What do you wish to do?'

'Tell the C-in-C I have General Stevens and three other hostages on board. I want to re-fuel and fly away, unharmed.'

There was a long pause before Whitehead replied.

'C-in-C says what assurances can you give that the hostages will be released?'

'Self-interest. Over.'

There was another long pause.

'Reply unsatisfactory. Release some of the hostages immediately as a token of your good faith.'

'Get undressed,' said Gambit.

'What?'

'Get your things off.'

'This is hardly the appropriate moment for such . . .'

'He's about my size. Come on.'

Gambit was already pulling his clothes off.

'Mike, what are you doing?'

'We are going to be released. At least General Stevens and this fellow here are.'

Purdey stripped off to her white satin underwear in a trice.

Gambit untied the soldier. 'Get into these.'

He handed him his clothes.

It was extremely difficult undressing the corpse, which was now quite stiff. Getting Purdey's clothes on to it was somewhat easier.

'Right, now lug the corpse into that Land Rover, the one by the door, come on, move along.'

The soldier, now wearing Gambit's clothes, did as he was told.

'Right, get into the Land Rover.'

'He had better have a headscarf,' said Purdey, tying it round the General's head.

'Very fetching. Now, I'll have you covered all the way. When I give the word, you drive down the ramp and stop twenty yards from the plane, understood, until the plane moves off. If you go a yard further you're dead.'

Gambit waved the FN rifle for good effect.

'Right, you keep him covered while I go and have a word with the Colonel.'

'I'll just put some clothes on first.'

'Purdey, this is almost the first time I've seen, how shall I put it, so much of you – and I didn't even have time to notice. Shame. Here, you can wear these.'

He handed Purdey a pair of trousers.

'I'll have to talk to the hostages, Wing-Commander,

give me a couple of minutes,' said Colonel Miller.

Miller went down to the door again.

'What's your decision?'

'We'll only come out on two conditions.'

'What are they?'

'One we go out in a Land Rover.'

'Right.'

'And two, warn them that Purdey is starving.'

'Right. Wait until I talk to Control.'

'Right.'

Miller spoke to Whitehead again.

'The hostages, the man Gambit and the girl Purdey, will leave the aircraft by Land Rover. They will halt not more than a hundred yards from the aircraft. You will start re-fuelling the aircraft now. When the tanks are full, I will give the signal to the hostages to disembark. Over.'

'I'll have to clear this with the C-in-C.'

General Said cut in.

'You'll have to clear this with us too. One false move and I'll blow you to the middle of next week. Understood. Over.'

'Yessir.'

'What do you make of that?' the C-in-C asked Steed.

'Well I'm glad they're alive at least. But it's not like them to give in meekly. I should accept. I would be surprised if they haven't thought of something.'

'C-in-C here. Accept Miller's terms. Let me speak to General Ben Said first.'

There was a little crackle on the line for a moment.

'Ben Said.'

'Ah Freddy. I've talked with our chaps here. We think we should accept Miller's terms. Once the hostages are out of the Hercules, let them get off. We'll keep the plane covered until they get tired of this game.'

'I'll have to talk to the Prince first. He would like to hang the lot publicly. He hates hijacking.'

'We all do, Freddy, we all do, it's just that he's holding one of our generals.'

They waited while Ben Said conferred with the Prince.

'The Prince says hunky dory, but you must promise to give us those missiles you refused last time.'

'I'll talk to the Prime Minister. Yes, all right, I agree. Wily devil,' he said to Steed and Prentice.

Miller waited for the go-ahead.

'Whitehead to Colonel Miller. You will take your orders from General Said now.'

'Understood, over.'

'Colonel, this is General Said. We shall begin re-fuelling now. When the operation is complete, the hostages must drive out, unharmed, and we will give you clearance for take-off. Understood? Over.'

'Understood. Out.'

Two tankers moved towards the Hercules. Miller switched off the intercom.

'Prepare your route to Umbezi. I'm going to talk to the hostages again.'

'Gambit.'

Gambit stood by the door.

'Yes?'

'You may leave the plane when I give the word. Drive down the ramp in the Land Rover and wait until the plane takes off before moving. Understood?'

'Yes, Colonel.'

'It will take about twenty minutes.'

'Right.'

'They'll shoot me out there,' said the soldier to Purdey.

'I shouldn't think so. Anyway, count yourself lucky you're not fish food, like your Sergeant.'

'You just drive out there nice and steady, or you'll get it from me as well, understand?' added Gambit.

'What's going on, sir?' Miller came in to talk to the rest of C-Company.

'We're leaving here, men. I'm afraid the mission has been cancelled. You will all be returning home in due course. Except for those who want to stay with me in Umbezi. They need some decent soldiers out there, I can tell you.'

'I'm not bloody going to Umbezi,' said one man, standing up.

Miller hit him with the butt of his pistol.

'You are. You will be courtmartialled at drumhead when we get there, too. Manacle him, Corporal.'

Reluctantly the Corporal shackled the man to his seat. He began to weep.

Miller looked at him with disgust for a moment before returning to the flight deck.

'How's it going, Flight-Lietuenant?'

'Three quarters full, sir.'

They watched, mesmerised, as the fuel gauges rose steadily.

'Right that's it.'

'Colonel Miller to control. We're full. Remove the tankers.'

'I'll give the orders around here, Colonel. Remove the tankers,' said Ben Said.

The hoses were unhooked and the tankers driven away.

'Release the hostages.'

'Open the cargo door.'

'Right,' said Gambit to the soldier, 'off you go. And remember what I told you.'

The Land Rover started first time as the cargo door opened and the ramp lowered. The soldier drove nervously down

the ramp, his head bowed as if expecting a bullet at any moment. Purdey's headscarf fluttered realistically for a moment in the breeze until the Land Rover halted, twenty yards away.

'Good lad,' said Gambit to himself, but he kept the FN rifle trained on the back of his head. The cargo ramp began to raise itself into position, the engines coughed and roared into life and the huge Hercules rolled forward.

'That didn't look much like Cyprus to me,' said Purdey. 'As far as I know there are not many camels in Cyprus.'

'Good deduction. I imagine we can expect a visit from our friend Miller soon. I wonder where our next port of call is going to be?'

'Somewhere where I can get a decent breakfast, I hope.'

'Yes, I'm getting a bit peckish myself. Missed lunch.'

Gambit removed a piece of chocolate from the inner recesses of his newly acquired uniform.

'I'm afraid it's a bit soft on account of the heat, but would you like some?'

'Like some? If you don't watch out I'll take your hand and the wrapper in one gulp.'

He watched Purdey eat, wearing a pair of trousers nine sizes too big for her and a white satin bra. The sight was so absurd that he began to laugh uncontrollably.

'I don't know what you're laughing at, you look pretty stupid dressed up as a general.'

'Room for expansion,' said Gambit, pulling the waistband of his trousers. The General's hat, unlike the rest of his clothes, was too small for Gambit. It rested on the top of his head uneasily.

General Ben Said thought he had handled the hijack rather well. He regretted not having the chance to bring some firepower to bear on the aircraft, but you couldn't have it all ways. The plane taxied to the end of the runway, away from the stationary Land Rover.

'Permission for take off requested.'

'Granted.'

The Hercules lumbered down the runway, the engines roaring. The General was eager to meet the girl in the Land Rover, being something of an expert on Western girls. He trained his binoculars on the Land Rover as the Hercules rose into the air. A strange sight greeted his inquisitive eyes. The headscarf blew away in the draft of the passing plane, revealing short, grey hair.

'Damned odd,' he said. 'Get those hostages here fast.'

'Yes General Excellency.'

Ben Said spoke to the C-in-C in England.

'Safely off.'

'Well done Freddy.'

'But there's something odd going on. We have an elderly man dressed up as a woman as one of the hostages.'

'Keep us informed.'

'Roger. I am going to investigate, interrogate these queer hostages.'

'How do you know they're . . . oh I see what you mean.'

The C-in-C went off to the squash courts.

In his excitement, Ben Said left a channel open. Miller heard the news with a sense of shock.

'Well my God we get nearer, I want you to radio Umbezi and give them our ETA', he said.

'Yessir,' said Barker.

Miller was pensive. He couldn't be too sure that the Minister would welcome him without the gold. But he now had very little choice. With the Hercules, the vehicles and two platoons left to him, he would make a welcome addition to the fighting forces of Umbezi, but not quite the same as if he had brought millions of dollars of gold with him as well. He decided not to tell the Minister until after they had landed.

He wondered if Bowden were still alive. That, too, could wait until they got to Umbezi, but he doubted if Bowden were still in there. Incompetent idiot, allowing them to get out. Still, it had helped him in his negotiations with the Bazranians. He could hardly have delivered up the body of a dead general as a hostage. In all his life as a fighting soldier, no exercise had ever gone so badly wrong for Colonel Miller. He did not like it. He sat brooding about his next move. Somebody was going to pay for this preferably Gambit and Purdy.

'The fighters are still following us, sir.'

'Can't you get rid of them?'

'If I overfly Egypt they should leave us alone.'

'Good, do it.'

'Yessir.'

'They've headed towards Egypt.'

Prentice and Steed were in the communications room with the duty officer, watching the progress of the Hercules.

'We can't follow them, sir,' said Whitehead, 'without Egyptian permission.'

'Let them go,' said Prentice.

'Right.'

'Umbezi,' said Steed. 'That's where they're going.'

'How do you know?'

'I am pretty sure. Miller's had a lot of dealings with the place.'

General Ben Said came on. 'The so-called hostages are an elderly man, dead, and a private soldier, Private William Noggett. He says the man and the girl changed clothes with them and sent him out in the vehicle.'

'Good God,' said Prentice.

'Come in,' said Ben Said.

'Sorry General,' said Prentice. 'Thank you, I'll pass your message on to the C-in-C when he's finished his squash.'

Prentice turned to Steed. For some reason, Steed was smiling.

'Steed, old fellow, I don't really think there's anything to laugh about.'

'Sorry Major. It's just that I was wondering what Purdey was wearing if she's given her things to General Stevens.'

'Are you feeling all right, old boy?'

'Oh fine, fine thank you.'

'What are we going to do now?'

'Let's talk about it over a glass of that excellent claret. The Chateau de Courcy 1957. Shall we?'

'All right.' Steed opened the door of the Jaguar.

Prentice got in beside him. Steed was still smiling.

'You seem very happy,' said Prentice.

'I am happy. I am happy because both Purdey and Gambit are still alive and because I am looking forward to a bit of sun.'

'Sun? What are you talking about?'

'It's very sunny in Umbezi, you know. I've decided to take a short holiday in that small, but pleasant country. They call it the Switzerland of Africa – because of the scenery and the stable finances. I've always had a hankering to see Umbezi by moonlight.'

'We can arrange transport as far as Nairobi.'

'Jolly good, here, use the phone.'

Steed passed the receiver to Prentice.

'Just one thing, Steed,' said Prentice.

'Yes Major?'

'Don't you think we should tell someone where you're going?'

'No need to stir up anxieties, old boy. I think it would be best for everyone if we could just get the plane back safely without too much notice taken, don't you?'

'Of course. But Stevens is dead and Miller is quite crazy . . .'

Steed interrupted him. 'I know, but think how much better it will all look if we can tidy it up quietly.'

'Are you sure . . . ?'

'Quite sure.'

Steed began to hum an aria as he drove the Jaguar at excessive speed through the countryside. Prentice spoke into the telephone.

'Thank you. Yes, top priority. Yes. Yes. Thank you.'

He turned to Steed. 'Your flight leaves from Boscombe in an hour and a half. That's twenty-one hundred hours. It's a special.'

'Thank you, Major. I always like to fly with a little something inside me. Just in time for a bottle, wouldn't you say?'

'Certainly.'

Prentice was smiling too, now. They pulled into the gates of his HQ and drew up outside the Mess. There was a fire burning in the grate, casting flickering shadows around the oak-panelled room. They settled down into the deep armchairs.

'Shouldn't think the claret's up to much in Umbezi,' said Prentice, pouring a couple of glasses.

'Not a chance,' said Steed. 'Too hot.'

In Umbezi, the landing lights at the airport were switched on at the agreed time.

The Minister himself was in the control tower waiting for the Hercules to appear. With Miller's help and Miller's money he could establish himself in an impregnable position, both in relation to the government, which was led by an enormous drunkard megalomaniac with nineteen wives, and in relation to the rebels who still clung tenaciously to the jungle area in the south of the country, despite all his efforts. The President was very popular with his people, but in the last few years had increasingly left all government business to the Minister.

The President knew full well that the Minister could never rival his popularity with the people. Occasionally he would remind him of it. It would give the Minister sleepless nights for weeks. He would be summoned to the palace and forced to drink vast quantities of liquor – the President's taste was for the local maize beer – then he would be shown around the dungeons, where previous ministers still languished, most of them quite crazy with torture and neglect. Sometimes the President would throw scraps of food to these people. Sometimes he would invite them to dinner, to sit at the table to remind the Minister that politics was a hazardous occupation in Umbezi. They would sit and eat and stare wildly around the room, their eyes blinking at the unaccustomed light, before being led, dazed, back to their cells. The palace was a relic of the colonial era, a vast, Victorian building, now enclosed in a huge perimeter wall, topped by machine-gun posts and anti-aircraft emplacements. Inside this fortress, the President remained for most of the time, drinking, writing letters to foreign heads of government, and occasionally torturing people.

The Minister, therefore, was anxious that his plans should go right. He stood staring at the radar screen. It was blank. He checked that his personal bodyguard, who numbered two hundred, were in position. They were. His bodyguard were fellow tribesmen, fanatically loyal to him. Except on his visits to the Palace, he went nowhere without them.

'Aircraft approaching, sir.'

On the radar screen he watched the concentration of signals which represented the approaching Hercules.

'Make radio contact.'

The radio operator put out the agreed signal.

'Hercules Victor one, requesting permission to land.'

'Granted.'

'Only one plane? Only one?' asked the Minister anxiously.

'Yessir,' replied the operator.

'What's gone wrong?'

The operator looked at him, surprised for a moment before the Minister checked himself.

Miller's voice came on. 'Colonel Miller here. Do not approach plane closely. We have hostages on board. Understood?'

'Yes Colonel. Everything all right?'

'Roger. Some difficulties. Will explain. Over and out.'

The Hercules made one pass over the airfield to check that there were no problems, and wheeled in a huge arc before landing. The runway was short, but Barker had brought planes down here many times.

'Take her to the end of the runway. I want to talk to the Minister before we disembark. And I don't want them blowing us all to bits as soon as they hear my news, so be ready for take-off if necessary.'

'Yessir. What about the hostages?' asked Barker.

'I'll have a word with them after we land. I am going to disembark alone to tell the Minister what has happened. If I don't come back, take off for Nairobi and give yourselves up. On no account do anything else without my orders. Understood?'

Barker, who was a tight-lipped person, realised what a risk the Colonel was taking. He wheeled the huge plane, ready for take-off again.

'Miller. I am disembarking in a moment. Would the Minister meet me half way to the control tower?'

'Roger.'

Miller paused by the door to the hold.

'Gambit. Gambit, it's Colonel Miller here. We have

landed. You will be returned to England safely if you surrender without any fuss. Understood?'

'Yessir.'

'Right, I will speak to you later. Don't do anything silly or you'll both be dead.'

'Right you are sir.'

The night air was very warm as the Colonel descended the steps down to the tarmac. He was a lonely figure, dwarfed by the aircraft as he walked across towards the control tower. Barker watched him, the engines idling, ready to gun them into life at a moment's notice. A car drove out onto the runway. The Colonel got into it.

'Hello Minister. How are you?'

'Well thank you. How did it go?'

'It didn't. We were intercepted by fighters.'

The Minister sat rigid. Fear seeped through him. 'And now?'

'Now, Minister, is the time for direct action. We must take the steps we discussed.'

'Without arms? Without money?'

'We have some men on board. And some weapons.'

'You are crazy. I should have you arrested.'

'Minister, I don't have a lot of options open to me now. Nor do you. If we strike now we can topple the government, take over the country and get on with our plans.'

'Yes. Yes. You are right.'

The Minister realised very clearly that death during an insurrection was a far more pleasant way to die than at the hands of the President. He had burned his boats now. He would be President himself, not of a rich country as he had envisaged, but of a small, rather poor country. If he failed he would die. He and Miller together. But the spectre of those deranged men in the dungeons haunted him. He had also been present more than once when the President had thrown people he disliked to the crocodiles

he kept in the palace gardens in what had once been an ornamental lake for the use of Governor's daughters.

'On board I have two hostages. They are spies of some sort. We must get rid of them too.'

'Yes, yes, you are right.'

'How many men do you have at your disposal, Minister?'

'Two hundred. Armed with light weapons only.'

'And I have two platoons. Some transport. A few missiles and some heavy machine-guns. That should do it.'

'Two platoons?'

The Minister was aghast. He pulled himself together after a few moments.

'What I suggest, Colonel, is that my men create a diversion round the back of the palace. While we keep the Palace Guard occupied, you blow down the front of the perimeter wall and take it. I'll get the radio stations as well.'

'What about the President?'

'He has a powerful effect on the people. He is a witch-doctor. I suggest you get rid of him quickly.'

'Right. You have the layout of the palace?'

In the car it was very hot. They could not open the windows because of the mosquitoes from the nearby swamps. And the air conditioning was not working. Nothing much worked in Umbezi. The two men, united in desperation, sat planning their campaign, the sweat pouring off them.

'How much time before daylight?'

'Four hours.'

'We should attack at dawn,' said Miller.

'Right.'

'Now let's get those hostages out. I will promise them safe conduct. You grab them and then do away with them.'

'I can't shoot them, that will bring all sorts of people.'

The Minister's face glistened with sweat.

'If they don't come out, I'll have to use gas,' said Miller.

'You mean they're running around free in your plane?'

'Not exactly. They're in the hold.'

Delgado Robert eyed Miller steadily for a moment or two.

'Right, you flush them out and I'll treat them to an old custom around here. We'll throw them in the river. The crocodiles will take care of them.'

'Excellent. Excellent.'

'Where do you imagine we are?' Gambit asked Purdey.

'I really don't know, but . . .'

'But you hope it's somewhere where you can get a bite to eat,' interrupted Gambit.

'Mike, how did you know?'

'I guessed.'

'Right, you know what to do, don't you?'

'Yes.'

A Ferret armoured car was ready at the cargo doors. Gambit had re-connected the electrics for the hydraulic door between the hold and the rest of the plane. Beside them were two loaded rifles, the property of the late Sergeant Bowden and his men. They waited for a long while before the engines of the plane were cut and they could hear the tread of the men disembarking. Eventually Miller's voice could be heard outside the door.

'Gambit.'

'Yessir?'

'You may get out here.'

'Where are we, sir?'

'In Umbezi.'

'How can we be sure we will be unharmed?'

'Gambit, you can't be sure of anything. The way you have carried on you are lucky I don't force this door and come and shoot you. You have already killed some of my men.'

'I have Sergeant Bowden with me here, sir.'

'I doubt it. As I was saying, you don't have a chance. Just come out and surrender. Come out the cargo door. You'll be covered, so don't do anything silly again, will you?'

'No sir.'

'Synchronise your watch with mine. It's one-o-five.'

'Yessir.'

'We'll lower the door at one ten; disembark, with your hands in the air.'

'Yessir. Understood.'

Gambit climbed into the Ferret.

'Cover me!'

Purdey held a long piece of rope in one hand and the FN rifle in the other.

At precisely one ten the cargo ramp began to lower. When it was fully down, Gambit started the motor; because the accelerator was tied down, it roared deafeningly in the bowels of the plane.

'Right,' Gambit jumped out of the Ferret. As his feet touched the floor, Purdey pulled the rope. The gears engaged and the Ferret lurched forward and shot down the ramp. Its nose hit the tarmac but it straightened up and roared away. Purdey and Gambit ran to the connecting door of the plane.

Miller and the Minister watched the Ferret appear from the plane.

'They're trying to make a run for it,' said the Minister.

'Bazooka,' said Colonel Miller. The Ferret was moving quite fast now. It took a few moments for the bazooka section to aim.

'Fire.'

The first shell hit the Ferret. It exploded in a ball of fire.

'Fools. Fools.' Miller turned to the Minister. 'Well,

there's your diversion. We had better attack now.'

'I suppose you're right,' said the Minister. He shouted at his men. 'If you can do that to a Ferret, what chance has his Serene Excellency got?'

'Not much. Come on.'

'We had better leave someone to secure the airfield.'

'Who? We haven't got anybody.'

They ran to the plane to unload the remaining transport and ammunition.

'If you give the alarm, you're dead,' said Gambit to Barker, who was the only man left on the plane. They heard the engines of the armoured cars and Land Rovers start up. It took only ten minutes to empty the plane, during which time Gambit held a gun at Barker's head.

After a while Barker gave a thumbs up signal out of the window. The vehicle engines receded into the distance.

'He's crazy, you know,' said Barker. 'He's quite crazy. Two platoons against an army.'

'What's going on?'

Barker was very tired and quite drained. He told them all.

'How much petrol have you got?'

'Not enough to get to Nairobi.'

'Is there any here?' asked Gambit.

'Yes.'

'Well let's re-fuel and get going,' said Gambit.

'You can't do that,' said Purdey.

'Why not?'

'Because there is a war going on here. Started by a British officer, involving British troops. We've got to stop them.'

'How?'

'We've got to get Miller.'

'If you think I am walking into town, and going around saying, "I say, have you seen a Colonel Miller, I've come to arrest him", you've got another think coming.'

'Come on Mike. We've got to get Miller and take him away from here.'

'It can't be done. Not by the two of us.'

'Oh yes it can.'

'All right. It can. How?'

'We should be able to get close to Miller dressed in uniform.'

'Me dressed like a general and you with a pair of trousers big enough for a circus tent. Don't make me laugh.'

'Anyway, I've got to get some food.'

Barker watched this argument in disbelief.

'Why don't we raise the President's palace on the radio,' he suggested.

'Because the President is a madman. He would annihilate them. We've got to kidnap Miller, get him back on board the plane and take him back home for trial.'

Purdey's beautiful face looked quite earnest for a moment as she said it.

'Right, I'm convinced. You'll have to come with us,' said Gambit to Barker. 'We don't want you running off, do we?'

'Why don't you just lock me up somewhere. I don't want to be mixed up in this. I'm a pilot.'

'Right, we'll lock you up in the building over there. How far is it into town?'

'About five miles.'

'How are we going to get there?'

'Can you ride a donkey?' asked Gambit.

'Probably.'

'There are bound to be some around.'

'Into battle on a donkey. Terrific,' said Purdey.

They rounded up two donkeys and were soon jogging uncomfortably down the road into town, a strange sight in the moonlight with their FN rifles and their ill-fitting uniforms.

*

Miller's and the Minister's meagre army had arrived in Umbezi town itself. The sight of their column streaming into town in strange vehicles, blazing away, frightened off the first few troops to appear. They halted half a mile from the palace and deployed their forces.

'Bring up the missile.'

A Land Rover drew up.

'Right, Minister, have a look at this. This is the most advanced small missile in the world. I could knock the President's boiled egg on the head at twenty-five miles.'

The Minister helped with the range. Orders were given. The electronic aiming devices swung the missile menacingly in the direction of the palace.

'Right men, we'll fire two of these. The bazookas at the gate and in you go. Knock out the machine-guns on the walls and that's it.'

'I'll take the radio station, Colonel, and broadcast the news of the revolution before they get out of barracks.'

'Good luck.'

They clasped hands for a moment.

'Fire,' shouted Colonel Miller.

The rocket took off surprisingly slowly at first. Some of the African troops were frozen as they watched it go. There was a streak of light through the sky, so that by the time it destroyed the former ballroom of the palace, its trail still lingered in the African night. The second missile exploded in the centre of the complex of buildings. Almost simultaneously bazookas ripped through the wrought iron gates of the palace.

'Right, Specials, let's get 'em.'

Colonel Miller, standing upright in the first of the three armoured cars led his men towards the smoking ruins of the President's palace. Tracer bullets cut the night into ribbons.

Still some miles away, Purdey and Gambit urged their donkeys on. The sky was now lit by the blaze at the Presidential palace.

'We may be too late,' said Purdey between bounces.

'For what? The fireworks display?'

'To stop the revolution. Come on boy. Hup, hup.'

'Mine has flaked out.'

Indeed Gambit's donkey was completely immobile. It was not keen to get any closer to the incandescent town of Umbezi.

'Gambit, it may be quicker to walk. Come on.'

'Your donkey seems to have ground to a halt, too. Come on, we'll run.'

Purdey's long legs, despite the heavy boots she was sporting, carried her at a pace Gambit found rather daunting. He almost wished he had not suggested running.

By the time they got to the outskirts of town, there was confusion and chaos. Africans were fleeing clutching their possessions. When they saw Purdey and Gambit they flung themselves to the ground, or ran in the opposite direction.

'They've never seen the WRACS before, it's terrifying them,' said Gambit.

'Why don't you shut up, Generalissimo.'

At that moment a jeep drove past at high speed. An inaccurate burst of fire in their direction caused them to fling themselves into a ditch.

'All clear, come on,' said Purdey.

Gambit stood up. The front of his impressive uniform was covered in mud.

'I feel like a warthog, trotting along like this all covered in mud.'

'Funny you should say that, I was just thinking ... look out.'

For the second time in a few minutes someone fired at them. This time Purdey landed in a puddle.

'Ah well,' said Gambit, 'you were too beautiful for this kind of work before.'

*

Miller's armoured car drove straight in the battered front gates of the palace. The palace, once a vast icing sugar pile, glowed and burnt fiercely in the night. Miller leapt from the armoured car, grabbed a machine-gun and personally silenced the only remaining gun emplacement.

'It's the rockets. Scared them all off.'

As his men came streaming in, he deployed them around the palace grounds. The only part of the palace still standing intact was a low concrete building, obviously a bunker of some sort.

'Chuck some CS down the shaft and see what comes up.'

The President and a few of his wives came up. He was drunk, wearing the uniform of a Field Marshal, clutching a bottle in one hand and a ceremonial African spear in the other.

'I surrender like a gentleman,' he said. 'I wish to sign articles with your Commander-in-Chief. I am an officer and a gentleman. I served in the British Army.'

He and Miller stood face to face. They had met before, when Miller had been helping drive the rebels away from the capital.

'Colonel Miller? What are you doing?'

'I am arresting you, sir, in the name of the new President, President Delgado Robert.'

The huge, fat man began to laugh uproariously.

'What are you talking about. I am a holy man. I am immortal. That child cannot harm me. You must be mad. Stupid. My people will avenge me.'

Colonel Miller shot the President in mid speech. For a moment it looked as though the President might indeed be immortal. He stood with a smile on his face for a few seconds before falling to the ground.

'Throw him in the lake. Bring a few prisoners along to see this. I don't want any damn mumbo jumbo martyrs around here.'

It took three men to move the President's body to the

lake. When his seventeen stone touched the water, there was a thrashing and boiling of the water as the crocodiles fought over it. The African spectators fell on their knees and wept.

'Right men. Secure the perimeter of the palace. We are the masters here now.'

By daybreak, Delgado Robert was installed as President of Umbezi. It was a ceremony attended by Colonel Miller, the new President's bodyguard, and the only ex-minister who could be found in town.

'Congratulations, President,' said Miller.

'Thank you, my friend. The people of my country will honour you.'

But the President was already wondering how he would rid himself of Miller.

CHAPTER 9

It took Steed only two hours to track down Hugh O'Donell. He was a man who had done many things in his life, many of them not very reputable. He lived in Nairobi in a run down hotel near the Indian market. He had once shot the chandeliers out at the New Stanley hotel with an elephant gun in his more prosperous days, but he was down on his luck now, because he had declined with the ivory industry. Steed made a few enquiries, in the right quarters. O'Donell, for a variety of reasons, was very well known in Nairobi.

'Good morning,' said Steed.

On the bed, huge, rumpled and unshaven, lay O'Donell. Beside him was an empty whisky bottle. He looked even worse than when Steed had last seen him, eight years before. At that time O'Donell had been an ivory poacher, for which he had been thrown out of Umbezi.

'Steed, go away, I haven't had breakfast yet.'

That seemed to settle it for O'Donell.

'Aren't you going to greet an old friend?'

'No. Go away. You are nothing but trouble.'

O'Donell did not even bother to look round at Steed.

'I want to go to Umbezi.'

'Impossible. The country's sealed off. No flights, no roads, no nothing. You can only go on the official airline at the government's pleasure.'

O'Donell had now turned round; like a whale floundering in the shallows he raised himself on one elbow and stared at Steed.

'Private planes?' asked Steed pleasantly.

'How badly do you want to get there?'

'Very badly. I say, this is awfully seedy, isn't it?' He flicked away a horde of flies with distaste.

O'Donell got up. He didn't have any clothes to pull on, because, apart from his shoes, he had been sleeping fully dressed.

'All right, come on. You'll have to pay cash, my credit's not what it was around here.'

Outside the hotel was a battered jeep, so old it might have antique value, thought Steed. O'Donell drove the vehicle as though he hated it. They soon left town behind and then the metalled road as well.

'Where are we going?'

'Umbezi,' said O'Donell.

'Jolly good.'

O'Donell took off down a track. The bush on either side was quite thick, thorn trees and elephant grass mostly.

'We're not driving all the way, are we?'

'Don't be a damn fool, Steed.'

'Sorry.'

Steed held on to his hat. The track was very bumpy and he did not want to crush it against the roof of the jeep. After about half an hour on this track, they turned off again, through a plantation of banana trees. On the other side of the plantation was an airfield. 'Field' was the exact description of it, thought Steed. The hangar was a large, corrugated iron shack. A windsock hung lifelessly on the end of a bamboo pole.

'You stay here,' said O'Donell, who walked in the direction of the hangar.

Steed watched as O'Donell went inside. He reappeared and asked Steed for a huge sum of money. Steed handed it over cheerfully.

'What do we get, Concorde?'

O'Donell did not respond to Steed's joke. Two Africans pushed open the sliding doors of the hangar and began to

tow an ancient biplane out on to the grass and mud runway.

'It's lovely, but it'll never fly Wilbur,' said Steed.

'Get in,' said O'Donell. 'Best damn plane in Africa.'

O'Donell did not bother much with warming up the engines. No sooner had they started than he began to taxi down the runway.

'You'll find the goggles in the pouch in front of you. You can take that damn silly hat off now,' bellowed O'Donell.

Steed had no sooner pulled the goggles and leather flying helmet on to his head than the engines began to roar and they were off, missing the tops of the banana trees by a few inches. Beneath them the African savannah fell away as they rose effortlessly into the air.

'How long a flight is it?' Steed shouted.

'What?'

'How long is the flight?'

'One hour and a half.'

'Lovely, couldn't be better,' said Steed to himself. O'Donell was preoccupied with opening a bottle of rye whisky with one hand while he guided the plane with the other through the thermal currents which rise above the hot, baked earth of Africa. O'Donell passed the bottle back to Steed.

'Thank you. Don't mind if I do.'

In the morning sun it was a marvellous flight. The biplane only flew at a thousand feet. Herds of antelope below them, startled by the noise and the shadow of the plane, wheeled and galloped away. Soon there were no longer any African villages. The bush grew denser and more tropical. They were descending into the huge rift valley of Africa, in which little Umbezi snuggled.

'Elephant country,' shouted O'Donell, who seemed to be more cheerful now, whether from the effects of the whisky or the flight, Steed could not tell. Below them the

lumbering grey shapes of a herd of elephants confirmed his words.

'All protected now,' O'Donell shouted.

'Jolly good,' said Steed.

O'Donell took the plane down almost to treetop level. They flew along the course of a river, their wing tips seeming to brush the sides of the ravine. O'Donell had lost none of his skill as a pilot in the intervening years, though Steed was unnerved to see him take a swig at the whisky bottle just as the river took a turn.

'Never see us coming, this way,' shouted O'Donell, handing back the whisky.

'Quite.'

'Got some friends near the capital, they'll help us.'

'What?'

O'Donell repeated his message.

'Excellent. We'll need some transport into town.'

The little plane flew steadily along the river, through an ever-deepening gorge. O'Donell began to chuckle and laugh.

'Wonderful to see you again Steed, you old devil.'

'Thank you.'

'Marvellous.'

'Watch out, left turn.'

'What?'

'Never mind.'

Below them, the ravine they had been following broadened out. There were a few villages to be seen, and signs of cultivation.

'Not far now. We'll take a look see, eh Steed?'

'Yes.'

They came in low over the approaches to Umbezi. A huge pall of smoke hung over the town itself.

'Good God. The palace has been wiped out.'

O'Donell began to laugh. He found it very, very funny.

They flew over the airport. With relief Steed saw the Hercules standing there.

'Right, let's get down somewhere.'

'You're the boss,' said O'Donell, putting the plane into a steep dive.

They landed near an African village a few miles from the airport on a piece of bare ground, occupied by a few goats which ran for their lives.

When the plane stopped, O'Donell grabbed Steed by the shoulder.

'You crafty devil, you knew about all this?' He gestured towards the cloud of smoke.

'Not really.'

'Lovely. A war. That's what I like.'

'You stay here. I will need you to get out.'

'Don't be stupid, I know Umbezi like the back of my hand. These people,' he gestured towards the village, 'are friends of mine.'

An old chieftain appeared with a retinue. He and O'Donell greeted each other like long-lost brothers.

'He says there has been fighting in the capital. President dead.'

The chief was holding a transistor radio in his hand, from which martial music emanated tinnily.

'He says that the new president is Delgado Robert. He took over in the night. The President has been fed to his own crocodiles.'

'Just shows, you can't trust your pets.'

'Do you want to go and see what's going on?'

'Yes.'

'Right, we'll just get them to hide the plane and then I'll borrow their truck.'

A few Africans helped wheel the biplane out of sight under some huge mopani trees. The truck was even older than O'Donell's plane. They set off, chugging and lurching, with an escort of twenty of the chief's men, carrying rifles, assegais and sticks with knobs on the end of them. O'Donell was chuckling and laughing away.

'It's like the old days, eh Steed?'

'It certainly is.'

'The old President was an awful tyrant. Loony. Completely crazy. The best thing that ever happened. Crocodiles, ho! ho! ho!'

Purdey and Gambit had taken over a jeep whose occupants had fled, conveniently leaving the keys in the ignition. They had driven straight in the gates of the palace in the confusion, without challenge.

They arrived just in time to see the end of the President.

'Crocodiles,' said Gambit.

'Very unpleasant.'

In the ensuing chaos of occupation, they managed to scurry about unnoticed with the other soldiers, always keeping as far from the light as they could. They attended the investiture of the new President, standing well to the back of the throng. The ceremony took place on the lawns near the crocodile pool, proving that politics in Umbezi was a high-risk occupation.

'You men, get on to the wall in that emplacement,' said an NCO to Gambit.

'Right.'

Gambit's general officer's uniform was now no more than a khaki shirt and a pair of drill trousers, but the NCO stared at them rather suspiciously as they hurried away in the half light.

Colonel Miller was concerned that when the Army discovered that the palace had been taken by a handful of men, they would re-group and attack. He and the new President conferred.

'What's happening, sir?'

'I've asked the Army to join our cause. I think they will come over soon.'

'Why don't we encourage them with a missile into the barracks?'

'Good idea. Good idea.'

As dawn was breaking, Miller's men fired another missile, into the heart of the Army's barracks on the outskirts of town. The half-hearted shooting from that quarter stopped immediately.

'Now, Mr President, let's see what happens.'

Miller's face was stern, cruel. He seemed to thrive on death and destruction.

'Colonel Miller, I would now like to complete the revolution without any further, undue loss of life.'

Delgado Robert wore across his chest an orange sash, with an order modelled on the order of the garter in the middle, the badge of office plucked from the corpse of the previous President minutes before his body was thrown to the crocodiles.

'Mr President, take it from a fighting man, you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.'

'I am concerned that there will be no eggs left at all at the end of the day, Colonel, if you follow my meaning.'

Miller had not suspected the Minister of being soft. He would see that there was no weakening.

'Just as you say, sir.'

'Now Colonel, let's go and wait for the officers from my Army to come and surrender. The only place still standing is the President's personal bunker. He was a great admirer of Adolf Hitler, you know.'

They went down the steps to the bunker. In the dark, something moved. Miller pulled out his pistol and fired. When they got some light set up in there, they discovered that Miller had shot a child, one of the former President's sons.

'Damned shame, but you can't be too careful Mr President.'

Delgado Robert, like many Africans, had a great sense

of family and kinship. He decided then and there to get rid of Miller as soon as he safely could. He had given a home to a monster. With Miller about, any chance he had of replacing the tyranny of the previous government with a more just, humanitarian regime, was small.

'I think, for appearance's sake, Colonel, it would be best if you sat behind me while I negotiate the surrender. Mercenaries are not popular in Africa just at the moment. Though, of course, necessary.'

'Right you are, sir.'

The first consignment of Army officers arrived, just as the President had predicted. They lay on the floor in surrender, as they would to their tribal chiefs. Miller insisted that they lay their weapons on the table in front of him.

From their perch on the palace walls, Purdey and Gambit watched the missile devastate the barracks a few miles away. The sun was rising over the sprawling shanties that made up the capital of Umbezi.

'He seems to like killing,' said Gambit.

'Loves it. No wonder the British Army was a bit constraining for him. Not the same sticking bayonets into sacks filled with straw, is it?'

'That's true.'

'How are we going to kidnap him?'

'Purdey, you were the one who thought it would be easy.'

'Well, listen to my plan.'

Purdey began to explain.

The whole Umbezi Army was in the new President's hands by ten in the morning. He addressed the people of Umbezi on television and radio.

'Fellow Citizens. The tyrant is overthrown. The former President is dead. He has been eaten by the crocodiles in

his pond. You are free under your new President, Delgado Robert. I promise you a new future in a new society. You will all be free citizens of Umbezi. The Army is on our side. Freedom is here. Long live Umbezi.'

This message went out all day at intervals, followed by instructions to the newly freed citizens of Umbezi not to move about on pain of being shot.

As Steed and O'Donell approached the town, they proceeded cautiously. The streets were quiet, following the new President's warnings to the people, but they did not want to take any chances.

'What are you up to Steed?'

O'Donell was half way through the whisky, but he did not seem to be at all drunk, apart from an improvement in his humour.

'What you up to?'

'I am trying to get hold of a renegade British officer and take him home quietly. I am also trying to find two of my people, whom he kidnapped.'

'Leave it to me. I have a wonderful knowledge of this town.'

'I know you do, my dear fellow. That's why I brought you along.'

'We must get inside the palace grounds to find out what is going on.'

'Bit risky, old boy.'

O'Donell led them down a maze of tiny tracks and streets, across the shanty town until they were very close to the walls of the palace.

'Now our only problem is to get in,' said O'Donell, 'but first let us get some breakfast. I wonder if the old Shepherd's hotel is still open.'

The hotel was a low, rambling building, surrounded by a verandah. O'Donell ordered the truck to stop outside and he and Steed marched up the front steps and into

reception. The manager, a very worried man, came up to them. The hotel was shabby and rundown, as though it had not been in use for some time.

'Mr Mahmood Shah, I would like you to meet Mr Steed, a visitor from London.'

'My goodness me, what are you doing here Mr O'Donell, there has been a coup d'état?'

'Breakfast, Shah, breakfast. That's what we've come for.'

'All the way from London?'

The manager was confused.

'State business, Mr Shah. Your best breakfast please.'

Steed and O'Donell were the only guests in the vast dining room. Mr Shah warmed to the task of providing breakfast for his distinguished visitors, and forgot, for a few minutes, that there was a revolution outside as he chided and chivvied his waiters.

'Little bit short-handed this morning, Mr O'Donell. In fact business has been very poor recently. Between you and me, the former President was not good for the touristic image of this country. Too many people eaten by crocodiles. Very sad.'

'This country could be the Switzerland of Africa,' said Steed between mouthfuls of Loch Fyne kipper.

'Very true, Mr Steed, very true. We hope for better times under our new President.'

Even as he spoke, workmen were removing the portrait of the previous President from the walls of the dining room.

'Wonderful man, the new President, oh yes,' said Mr Shah happily. 'Everything to your taste, Mr O'Donell?'

'Very good Shah, very good. How about a drop of that Highland Malt you keep hidden for special occasions?'

'Mr O'Donell, this is not the old days you know, not at all. A very different class of customer we get these days.'

But Mr Shah was persuaded nonetheless to get the

whisky out. He was obviously hoping that the old days were back again, because his fifteen-year-old highland malt was excellent and put Steed in the mood for a second helping of kedgeree.

'Mr Shah,' said Steed.

'Yes Mr Steed?'

'Can you take a message to the new President?'

'Now, now Mr Steed. Politics is not my game.'

'This is not politics, Mr Shah, this is a message service.'

'I may be able to help.'

'Good, good. A piece of paper please.'

Steed and O'Donell repaired to the smoking room after breakfast where they had another dram of the whisky.

'Well, Steed, what do you want to do now?'

'Nothing much. Just wait until the new President gets my message; perhaps a stroll in the garden to see the pet monkeys you spoke of would settle the kedgeree.'

'You sure you don't want to sneak into the palace?'

'Get shot on a lovely morning like this? Not on your life. Come on old boy, show us around.'

Mr Mahmood Shah was rehearsing the message Steed had given him. It seemed to be mumbo jumbo to him, but Steed had insisted he learn it off by heart and repeat it word for word, only in the presence of Delgado Robert.

He presented himself at the gates of the palace where the guard were looking around eagerly for someone to shoot. Shah only escaped this fate because he was a well-known supplier of black market goods. Everyone tried to keep in with him in Umbezi. A message was sent inside and eventually Shah was shown into the presence of the new president.

'I have come to offer my sincere congratulations, Mr President.'

'Shah, I know all about your smuggling and black

market operations. Don't worry, I have more important things to think about at the moment.'

'You are very kind, Mr President, very kind, even now your portrait is being affixed to the wall of my humble hotel. But I have an important message for you in private.'

Shah and the President walked alone in the gardens, which were now more like a tank training ground than an English ornamental garden.

'Come on Shah, I am very busy, what is your message?'

'It's from Mr Steed. He says he will swop you one Commando Colonel for ten Dragoons Inniskilling.'

'Steed? Where is he?'

'In my hotel, sir.'

'You've done well, Shah, very well. Tell Steed to wait at the hotel. I will meet him at precisely one o'clock in the back billiards room. And say fifteen hussars.'

'Yessir.'

The new President's handsome, brown face looked very much happier.

'Steed. Amazing. We'll have my inauguration dinner in your hotel, Shah. I hope you haven't sold all the champagne yet?'

'No sir. I have a little left.'

'Good man, good man.'

When he was excited, Delgado Robert tended to become very Sandhurst and Oxford.

Many of Miller's men had fallen asleep in the sun, now that the Umbezi Army was under the President's control. Miller himself had set up a tent as campaign headquarters. From all accounts it looked as though the country had accepted the new government, perhaps without enthusiasm but nonetheless without too much hostility. Miller knew that his men would have a lot more to do soon, so he

allowed them to rest and eat. A field kitchen was working busily, to provide them with some much needed food. He called one of his NCOs in.

'Get that man in for courtmartial.'

'Couldn't we just forget it . . .'

Miller's look told him that there was no question of such a thing. The man was brought in. The ceremonial drum was placed in front of Miller.

'You have been convicted of the highest crime in any army. Disobedience. Armies work on total and utter obedience to all orders from above. Understood?'

'Yessir.'

'There is only one punishment.'

'What? You're not going to . . .'

'A firing squad. We'll show these chaps what discipline is all about. Our survival in this hostile climate depends upon discipline. Complete discipline. Take him away. Carry out the sentence of this court immediately.'

To the solemn beating of the drum the boy was dragged to the perimeter wall and shot, within the space of a few minutes. The African troops looked on in amazement.

'I wonder what that was for,' said Gambit.

'He really is a sadist.'

The body of the soldier, riddled with FN bullets, was covered in a piece of canvas awning and taken away for burial, before the powerful effects of moisture and tropical heat began to work.

'I think we should get on with it now while the camp is mostly asleep, don't you? said Purdey.

'I do.' Gambit and Purdey came down from their machine-gun post, as if to join the other troops having a nap in the shade of the giant African fig trees. Gambit walked cautiously to the Colonel's tent. Just as he was about to go in, the President came towards the tent with a few aides. Gambit saluted smartly.

'Colonel,' said the President. 'I am just going to go off

to the broadcasting station for another broadcast. We'll review the situation in an hour.'

'Yes Mr President.'

'By the way, why was that man executed?'

'Disobedience, sir. I will never be a party to that sort of behaviour.'

'Quite.'

Gambit saluted again as the President came out of the tent. He paused by the flap of the tent. Just in time he turned away, because the Colonel came out and strode across to the field kitchen. Gambit joined Purdey again.

'No luck. I've got to get him alone somehow.'

'He'll have to sleep some time.'

'I suppose so. With Miller you can't be too sure.'

Steed's meeting with the new President had gone very well. He was an avid collector of miniature soldiers too; Steed had introduced him to the habit some years before during his training.

'So you see, Mr President, it would just be a straight swop.'

'Quite. There's just one thing, I will need help with the rebels in the south. A few rockets, the sort that are on the prohibited list. You know the kind of thing.'

'I'll see what I can do. I have the ear of the Commander-in-Chief. I know that our strategists would look very favourably on a government run by you. And of course, they don't want any breath of scandal to reach the outside world, so it's a two-way deal. Lend me a radio and I'll get on to them now.'

'Good, good. Shah, bring us another brandy.'

'Yes Mr President.'

The new President and Steed, sitting in deep leather armchairs, had a very fine Remy Martin amid the billiard tables, all of them quite silent. Mr Shah, as he poured the brandies into tulip-shaped glasses, could almost imagine

the click of billiard balls again and the wreaths of cigar smoke, not to mention the pleasant jangle of the cash register. Yes, yes, the old times were just round the corner again.

'Have you seen my two colleagues?' asked Steed.

'I am afraid, Steed, that the Colonel has blown them up.'

When the President had explained the circumstances to Steed, he was surprised to see that Steed did not seem to be overly concerned.

'Mr President, I don't think they were in that Ferret. I know them better than you do.'

'If you say so. I'll turn Miller over to you tomorrow. But you must have the back-up to get him out of here. His men are loyal to him, whether from fear or admiration I don't know. I want every last one of them off our territory tomorrow.'

'Right. I'll get help.'

'And remember, I want those Dragoon Guards for my collection. You promised.'

'I did.'

After the President had gone, O'Donell and Steed played billiards.

'You haven't changed, Steed, have you?'

'And what about you, Hugh?'

'I'm a washed-up pilot and ivory hunter. But I enjoy myself.'

'Well then, you haven't changed either. Play you three frames for a pound a point.'

'You'll lose.'

O'Donell was right. Steed had to pay up a considerable sum. He began to wonder if O'Donell wasn't simply a very good hustler.

'Can't play any more,' said Steed, 'I must get in touch with HQ.'

'Right, well I'll just go and have a snooze. Wake me if anything exciting happens'.

Colonel Miller finally lay down in his tent towards the end of the day. Gambit and Purdey moved in. They skirted a group of sleeping soldiers, one of whom stirred in his sleep and woke. From where he was lying, he caught sight of something strange. The tall, thin soldier was wearing a pair of green shoes, which passed quite close to his nose. He got up to investigate what was going on.

Gambit hit Miller as he rose from his bed. Miller tried to get up again, but Gambit gave him a short chop on the back of the neck. He sank to the ground without a sound.

'Right, I'll get the jeep,' said Purdey.

As she came round the corner of the tent, three men grabbed her. She managed to throw two of them before she was overpowered.

'You can come out,' said one of the men, 'we've got the girl.'

'And I've got the Colonel.'

'You had better come out with your hands up, or she goes straight to the crocodiles.'

'Don't do it, Mike,' shouted Purdey, but Gambit came out. They were led away and locked up in the former President's bunker.

'Great plan, Purdey.'

'You shouldn't have surrendered.'

'I was thinking of those crocodiles. I mean what sort of meal would you have been? You haven't eaten for days. I love animals and it would simply not have been fair.'

'I think it's your turn to work out our next move.'

'What do you say to a crocodile face to face that will appease him?'

'Make it snappy.'

'Very funny.'

'I don't suppose Miller will make a slip-up this time,' said Purdey.

'No, I doubt it. He won't come round for a while, but when he does he's going to be in a very bad mood.'

CHAPTER 10

When Colonel Miller came to he had a splitting headache.

'What happened?'

'You were attacked by the two spies, sir. I have them in safe custody.'

'What? Those two? I thought we finished them off at the airport.'

'It seems not, sir.'

'What time is it?'

'Twenty hundred hours, sir.'

'If either of those two escape again, I'll have every man in the outfit lashed to a gun carriage and flogged, do you hear me?'

'Yessir.'

'I must go and see the President now. Have you told him of this?'

'No sir, I thought it best to say you were sleeping when you missed your appointment.'

'Good. He's a bit soft I fear. He would not like it. We'll throw them to the crocodiles.'

'They only feed in the day, sir, when they're warm.'

'Well we'll throw them in after breakfast.'

'Yessir.'

Miller strode off to find the President. The President was in a very good mood.

'Everything's going well, Colonel. Did you have a good sleep?'

'Yes sir, I did thank you. I apologise for missing our appointment.'

'I quite understand, Colonel. The last regiment has come over to us. They were on exercise in the south.'

'Good show. When do we move against the rebels?'

'Not long now, Colonel. Of course your invaluable assistance will be sought, but I mustn't overlook my own army. They would be most put out.'

'I understand. Keep in the background, but pull the strings, that sort of thing?'

'That's more or less the idea, Colonel.'

'What do you mean, "more or less"? After all I have furthered your political career, shall we say, dramatically?'

The President stood up. He was an accomplished politician.

'Colonel, you are going to be a great hero of our country. You are going to live here as long as you like as an honorary citizen. But you will understand that a little discretion about your exact role in my sudden elevation is required.'

'Of course, sir. I was forgetting myself.'

'Not at all. Come let us have dinner together. We will go to my house, the town is now secure.'

'If you don't mind, sir, I would prefer not to leave my men at this stage.'

'Of course, I don't mind.'

The President was thinking about how he would get rid of Miller without bloodshed as they ate their goat stew with yams.

O'Donell sat slumped in a chair after his dinner.

'O'Donell,' said Steed. 'O'Donell, wake up.'

He did not move. Steed dropped a few ice cubes in a glass near O'Donell's head.

'No ice thank you,' he said brightly, 'just straight, without water.'

'Don't you do anything but sleep?' asked Steed.

'Not if I can help it.'

'It's a lovely night, let's go and explore.'

They sat on the verandah, with only the mosquito screens between them and the warm, pungent African night. The

insects were in very good voice, though the town itself was quiet and still, without lights.

'What do you want to explore?' said O'Donell.

'I just want to make sure that my two friends are safe.'

'Shah. Waiter, call Mr Shah.' O'Donell's eyes had lit up at the prospect of a little excitement.

Mr Shah appeared.

'Mr Shah, could you give us five or six corks please.'

'Corks, Mr O'Donell? Without bottles attached?'

'That's the idea, Shah. Hurry up.'

While O'Donell burnt the ends of corks with his cigarette lighter, Steed applied black face make-up. When he was completely black, they reversed roles. Then they set out for the palace.

'Follow me, Steed, this way.'

O'Donell had had many years experience in Africa as hunter, guide, poacher and mercenary. He led Steed through the streets of Umbezi as though in his own back garden.

'I don't think we can get in the front gate,' said O'Donell. 'We'll be better off getting into the President's bunker by the back way. Nothing much left of the palace by the looks of things.'

'How do you know about the back way?'

'Ah well, that would be telling. But I used to be a friend of the previous President before he went bonkers. Quite a reasonable NCO in the Rifles, you know. I taught him to play gin rummy. Follow me.' O'Donell led the way down to the river. They took one of the boats tied up by the fishermen, and O'Donell paddled them downstream.

'Here we are, beside the palace grounds. I used to bring contraband this way for the President. Come to think of it, it's probably my fault he was hooked on London Dry Gin. Oh well, that's showbusiness.'

They passed close under the wall around the grounds. The water of the river was inky black in the night, full of

strange sounds, slithering and rustling of reptiles, croaking of bull-frogs, quick, furtive scurrying through the undergrowth beside the water. O'Donell took no notice at all of such things.

'Right, we get out here. There's a secret gate. I doubt anyone has discovered it. We won't be able to go too far, because there's a grille, like in a bank vault. Alas, I don't have a key.'

'Ah well, I may be able to help in that department,' said Steed, stepping gingerly ashore.

He followed O'Donell through some thick bushes, and into a small entrance in the wall. O'Donell lit a match to guide them. The passageway only went as far as a set of steps, at the top of which was the grille as O'Donell had said. Despite the fact that it was very old and rusted, Steed had the lock undone within minutes.

They walked cautiously up a passageway, which came to a solid steel door. It was fastened on the inside by bolts by the look of it.

'Sorry Steed,' said O'Donell, 'that looks like the end of the road.'

'What about that grate up there?'

'Climb on my shoulders and have a look.'

O'Donell bent down. Steed removed his shoes, hooked his umbrella through the grate, and O'Donell stood up. Steed could just see into a large, concrete flagged room inside. It was dark in there. He whistled, once, sharply, like the note of a night jar. Immediately there was an answering whistle.

'Steed, Steed, is that you?' It was Purdey's voice.

'Yes. Are you all right?'

'Fine so far. What on earth are you doing?'

'Summer holidays. Don't worry, we'll have you out in the morning.'

'Try and make it before breakfast. We're on the menu again, this time for the crocs,' said Gambit.

'I didn't realise it was a gastronomic tour,' said Steed.

'Sssh, there's a guard outside.'

A light came on in the room; Steed dropped to the floor. He could hear Colonel Miller's voice. The gist of his conversation was that he was looking forward to feeding time at the crocodile pond. He shouted and raved. Steed thought that there was a new note in his voice, one of pure madness. He and O'Donell slipped away, down the passage, back to the river. O'Donell was enjoying it all enormously.

'What's going on, eh Steed, tell me?'

'I've told you. A British officer has gone crazy and we are trying to take him home.'

'What about the girl's voice? You always had an eye, eh, you old devil.'

'Don't do that, you'll have us in the water.'

They paddled silently for a while down the river. Somewhere in the distance was a strange, whooping noise, like a soul in distress.

'What's that?' asked Steed.

'Hyena. They'll be after the dead. Nasty devils.'

'Shall we go back to the hotel? Shah looks like a man who would keep a good supply of port.'

'Best cellar in Africa. In the old days you couldn't get in the hotel except in evening dress. Splendid. Planters from miles around spending their hard-earned cash. Did I ever tell you about how I shot . . .'

As O'Donell talked, there was a sudden whiplash of rifle fire.

'Quick, in the water.'

'In this?' said Steed. 'What about the crocodiles?'

But as another shot passed right through the boat and water began to seep in, he quickly followed O'Donell into the water. It was warm, warmer than the surrounding air. O'Donell led the way to the opposite bank, as the erratic firing followed the empty boat downstream.

'Never could shoot, these chaps,' said O'Donell, as they slithered on to the bank.

'Never mind that. What about the crocs?'

'Don't feed at night. Get sluggish.'

'Now you tell me. That was the worst swim I've ever had.'

O'Donell started to laugh.

'What's so funny?'

'What would your tailor say if he could see you now?'

Miller shouted at Purdey and Gambit for ten minutes. His rage was maniacal. His every plan had been frustrated, upset, by these two. They were the sort of people he didn't like at the best of times. Too cocky by half. He had been made a fool of. They were worthless loafers. He alone in the whole British Army had some standards, some sense of purpose, some decency. He alone believed in tradition and discipline. The country was going to pieces because of the likes of them.

Purdey and Gambit sat quietly while he ranted. Miller's one eye was cloudy, as though he were wearing a contact lens. He stalked up and down their cell, his swagger stick waving frantically.

'He's gone,' said Gambit in a whisper.

'Bonkers,' agreed Purdey.

'What was that?' bellowed Miller, 'what was that? I'll have you two executed in the most ghastly manner imaginable.'

'Worse than crocodiles? Colonel, how exciting.' Purdey smiled sweetly at Colonel Miller.

'What sort of woman are you? Where were you brought up? Have you no decency?'

'Colonel, I don't think you realise what you are saying. You are guilty of treason, you have almost started a world war, you have stolen a plane, you have fomented a rebel-

lion in a foreign country, you are proposing to execute us – you don't know the meaning of the word decency.'

Gambit was hoping for an opportunity to grab the Colonel, but instead of provoking him to some act of folly, Gambit silenced the Colonel. As suddenly as it had begun, his rage died down. He turned on his heel and walked away, his bearing very straight and correct.

'How did Steed get here?' asked Gambit when he had gone.

'Steed has his ways,' said Purdey. 'Thank goodness.'

Purdey lay on the board stretched between two chairs, which was the only thing that passed for a bed in the room, as comfortably and as relaxed as if she were asleep in the Ritz.

'Good old Steed,' she murmured as she dozed off.

Steed and O'Donell staggered along the bank of the river.

'O'Donell, how are we going to get to the other side?'

'Ah, well, this is a bit of a problem, unless you fancy another swim.'

'I don't. It may just be warm enough for some crocodile to fancy a late night snack.'

The air was foetid, heavy with the smells of tropical night. Without warning, three soldiers stepped out from behind some bushes. They shouted something in the local language.

'What are they saying?' asked Steed.

'We're under arrest. Spies.'

The two white men, smeared with mud, their clothes wringing wet, were led away, hands in the air, by their captors, who found the sight of them extremely funny.

'Whose side are they on?' asked Steed.

'Who knows. I don't think they do,' said O'Donell.

O'Donell spoke to the soldiers, but they laughed at him. One slapped him lightly around the head, as if he were a naughty boy.

'We're going to see their commander. I think they're the rebels from the southern province.'

The commander, a large man with a beard and a camouflage jacket, sat in a hut, in front of him a trestle table. On the table was a hurricane lamp and a Russian-made pistol. He spoke English with gusto.

'Spies. Well, well, what a how do you do. Who are you?'

'My name is John Steed. I have been sent here by the British Government to . . .'

'I thought so. Spies. Condemned by your own tongue. What a strange carry on.'

O'Donell tried speaking to the commander in his own language, but he simply laughed.

'You are a spy and a poacher. You are a wicked imperialist running dog, my friend. Well known for your exploitation of our country and its people. And you look right daft in all that mud.'

Steed was wondering where he had learned his English.

'I have been in England myself, you know,' said the Commander, 'I studied catering in Bermondsey. Before becoming a revolutionary.'

'Jolly interesting,' said Steed.

'I can make a rissole which would blow your brains,' said the Commander.

'I don't doubt it,' said Steed. 'I've always been interested in food myself. What do you eat out here in the bush on campaign?'

'Naughty, naughty. Trying to get behind me. I wasn't born tomorrow you know.'

'I can believe it. Look, we have some important business to finish. A bottle of port at the Shepherd Hotel. Can we go? From one lover of food to another.'

'Silly man. I want to chew the lard with you. Hang about. I want to know what you're up to.'

Steed and O'Donell sat down on boxes. The Commander obviously enjoyed talking English, because he talked non-

stop for some hours. His men, with loaded rifles, stood around in the background, dazed by their Commander's grasp of international diplomacy. Occasionally the Commander would pause in his monologue to say something to them, describing his oratory briefly, and they would make approving noises and nudge each other. Another lantern had to be fetched as this one flickered, exhausted by the Commander's flow of English, which had obviously been pent up for some years. Whenever Steed or O'Donell moved, there was an ominous click of rifles in the background.

'We have a way with spies. A traditional way.'

'Crocodiles?' asked Steed suavely.

'Yes. Crocs. Chomp, chomp, like the fine blender on a mouli.'

The commander paused to explain the brilliance of his point to his men who laughed loudly and poked each other in the ribs.

'O'Donell, for God's sake do something, get us out of this mess,' said Steed, when the Commander paused briefly to cuff someone who had fallen asleep despite the incandescence of his oratory.

'The man is determined to kill us.'

'Why?'

'Why? Because he is a revolutionary.'

'Can't you think of something?'

The conversation was interrupted by the Commander.

'Naughty, naughty. Prisoners talking amongst themselves. Now I am going to eat and in the morning, first light, tied foot and mouth, into the river with you. Goodnight. Sleep tight, don't let the mosquitos bite.'

'Goodnight,' said Steed. 'There's just one thing that might interest you sir.'

The Commander, paused, his huge hands grasping the pistol.

'Yes?'

At first light, Miller was already up. He waited for the President, who had moved into the town. The President called Steed at the Shepherd Hotel, but Mr Shah said that Steed had not come back that night. Nor Mr O'Donell. The President was worried, fearing that Steed might have fallen into Miller's hands. Eventually he asked one of his aides to show Miller in.

'Morning sir,' said Miller briskly, 'busy day, eh?'

'Yes Colonel, yes.'

'We have to execute the spies first thing. Thought the crocodile pool would be appropriate, you know the form.'

'Colonel, I don't think it will be necessary to execute them right away. A trial will be arranged in due course. Evidence examined.'

Miller was thunderstruck. He stared at the President.

'Trial? I'll give them a fair trial, then execute them, it won't take ten minutes. We've got to be getting on Mr President, no time for trials and lawyers whining and pleading. No, no man.'

'Colonel Miller, I would remind you that this is an independent country. We don't want to be just another petty tyranny. That's why we removed the last President.'

'Mr President, if you imagine I am going to sit around while those two murderers laugh in my face, those spies, those louts, you are mightily mistaken.'

'All right, Miller but wait a while, I've got a lot to do before I can come over to the old palace.'

The President was deeply worried. He could not remove Miller without back-up, yet there was no sign of Steed or the support from London Steed had promised. He couldn't have Miller running around the country executing people arbitrarily, yet he couldn't stop him. He sat in his room, paralysed with indecision.

Miller, as was his way, paused by the door. 'They go into the pool in half an hour, with or without your permission – Mr President.'

The last phrase was full of threat, which the President did not fail to notice. When Miller had gone he rang the airport to see if there was any sign of the British. There was none. He tried to get hold of the Army commanders, but they were all keeping out of sight until they saw which way things moved. Miller was effectively in control of Umbezi.

Miller returned to the palace grounds, where his men were camped.

'Get the men on parade. We execute the spies at six fifteen precisely.'

'Yessir.'

It was a curious sight, two platoons of British soldiers on parade in front of the still smoking ruins of the palace. The Colonel marched out from his quarters. The platoons were called to attention. Miller addressed them.

'Men this is the end of the line. We are now in control of our own destiny. We will set up here in the way I have always planned, a proper military government.'

'Does that mean we'll not be going back to England, sir?'

'It does.'

The men, some of the toughest and most desperate men in the whole army, began to protest, despite the risk any man ran in arguing with his colonel.

'Just in case you think you can go back to England,' said Colonel Miller, 'let me tell you that any man who sets foot in England will be courtmartialled and jailed for life. You are going to be the elite of a new army here in Umbezi.'

The men knew that the Colonel had finally gone completely mad. Mad Jack, once a term of endearment, was now a reality.

'Bring out the prisoners.'

Gambit and Purdey were led into the already hot morning sun.

'Where's Steed, I wonder?' said Purdey.

'I don't see him.'

The Colonel stood on the ornamental bridge that crossed the crocodile pool, whose waters were green and deep, only occasionally disturbed by the ripples sent up by the crocodiles as they swam powerfully below the surface, or lazed on the surface of the water. In order to excite them, the keeper threw a live goat into the water. It was bleating horribly for a few seconds, before there was a tearing and thrashing and boiling of the water. In no more than thirty seconds the water was still again, though stained a deep red.

'What's the time, Corporal?' asked Miller, after he tore his eyes away from the pool.

'Precisely six ten hours, sir.'

'Right, men, form a square.'

The platoons formed around the Colonel, with Purdey and Gambit facing the crocodile pool.

'The facts are that these two spies, attempted to disrupt our operation, caused us to lose three men on service, half our number in Bazrah and have consistently failed to reveal who sent them or for what purpose. This is plain. I have discussed with the President and it is his verdict, and mine, that they should die in a manner traditionally associated with this great country of Umbezi.'

The Colonel's mouth was flecked with foam, as though he were about to undergo an epileptic fit. His head began to shake, his words became garbled and incoherent, yet he persisted with his speech.

Purdey and Gambit looked in vain for any sign of Steed. The Colonel ranted.

'So the sentence of this court is death by crocodile. Do the prisoners have anything to say before sentence is carried out?'

'Yes, I do,' said Purdey. 'This is ridiculous. If you men let us go we can help you get back home and forget all this.'

'Silence.'

'You are cutting yourselves off from your home for ever if you allow this lunatic to kill us,' said Gambit.

Colonel Miller strode forward and struck Gambit on the face. 'Execute them. Now.'

The men were reluctant to move. Miller drew his pistol. He pointed it at the head of one of his NCOs.

'Throw them in, or this man dies too.'

Three men stepped forward and seized Purdey by the arms. On the surface of the pool, five crocodiles smiled in their sinister fashion. They were used to this ritual. The men began to move Purdey towards the edge.

'Wait,' shouted Gambit. 'There's a helicopter.'

In fact three helicopters swooped over the grounds of the palace, Westland helicopters in camouflage. The men holding Purdey froze.

'Throw her in, throw her in,' shouted the Colonel.

The helicopter landed. Twenty men jumped out, led by Steed and Colonel Foster. The second helicopter landed. The President and his bodyguard got out. The third helicopter, full of troops too, hovered overhead.

Miller pointed his pistol at Purdey's head.

'Halt. Come a step closer and I shoot.'

Foster motioned his men to stop.

'Don't be a fool, Miller,' shouted Steed. 'Let her go. There's no good in shooting her now.'

'I would rather die like a man,' said Miller, 'than be taken back. I am a fighting man.'

'Your fighting days are over,' said Foster, edging forwards.

'That's enough,' said Miller. 'One more step and she's dead.'

As everyone stood, motionless, the roar of the helicopter above seemed deafening.

'Now look here Colonel,' said Steed, 'you want to die like a man, but would a man kill a woman? What sort of soldier does that make you?'

Colonel Miller stiffened. For a fraction of a second his concentration wavered. Gambit's feet, although shackled, flew up and caught him on the chest. The flying kick knocked the Colonel over backwards and ten feet away, so that as he landed his torso slipped into the water of the pool. Even as he tried to scramble back, a crocodile grabbed his arms, then another, and he disappeared below the surface in a teeming, thrashing, orgy of primitive greed. The goat had only taken thirty seconds, but the frenzy in the pool lasted nearly a minute before the crocodiles had devoured Colonel Miller.

Steed stepped forwards.

'Sorry I was so late. Had a spot of bother with some of the locals.'

'Hello Uncle Elly,' said Purdey, kissing Colonel Foster. His men cheered.

'Not so much of the "Uncle Elly", if you don't mind. My goodness me, but you're quite a gel. Cool as a cucumber eh?'

'What are you doing here?' asked Gambit.

'Steed sent for me,' replied Foster. 'Come and help tidy up here. Only just in time, what?'

He glanced at the crocodile pool, where all was peace and serenity now.

'Damn fine soldier you know. Fine fighting man. Well, come on, come on.'

EPILOGUE

Mr Shah was confused.

'Another breakfast, Miss? You've had two already.'

'I know,' said Purdey, 'now I want a third.'

'Certainly, Miss.'

'And Shah, a bottle of champagne,' said Steed.

'Ah Steed, what a sense of occasion you have,' said Gambit.

They were sitting on the verandah of the Shepherd Hotel, having breakfast together. O'Donell was asleep in a chair nearby, a three-day old copy of the *Times* sheltering his face from the rays of the sun.

'You had me worried for a while,' said Gambit. 'What happened to you?'

'Well the intrepid O'Donell and I went out to look for you as you know, but unfortunately on the way back here we were ambushed by some rebels. Well they're not rebels any longer as it happens, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Ah, Mr Shah, vintage as well, how marvellous, I couldn't have chosen a better spot for a summer holiday, just put it down, thank you. As I was saying, the rebels captured us. I was rather worried because your uncle, Colonel Foster, and I had a rendezvous at the airport at five thirty. You see the President is an old acquaintance of mine. He didn't want Miller here a moment longer than was necessary either. Anyway, the commander of the rebels, who studied catering in Bermondsey, decided we were spies . . .'

'It must be the heat,' said Purdey touching her head in a meaningful way, between bites of scrambled egg. 'Excellent scrambled egg, Mr Shah. There isn't any more toast by any chance, is there?'

Steed resumed his tale.

'In order to get away from the rebels and come and save you, I had to think of something.'

'And what was that,' asked Gambit.

'Well, I promised him that if he let us go, I would arrange some of the new missiles for his cause. Don't tell the President. I am sure they'll be able to get together in the future.'

'Why did he believe you?'

'Ah well, that's another story. Mr Shah, could I trouble you for a little caviar?'

'Oh yes, the good old days are here again,' muttered Shah to himself as he hurried off to the kitchens. 'Most definitely.'

Colonel Foster appeared.

'Well,' asked Steed, 'how did it go?'

'Jolly good. All Miller's men want to return home quietly. No tales told, honourable discharge, that sort of thing. All fixed. The President wants us to leave as soon as possible, could be embarrassing and all that. Marvellous thing getting rid of the last President, appalling tyrant. Possibly the most useful thing Miller ever did in his misguided life, poor soul.'

'Uncle Elly, you look all hot and bothered, do sit down and join us.'

'I will. I say Steed,' said Foster, 'why are you wearing make-up? Bit damned theatrical, isn't it, not on really.'

'Ah well,' said Steed, 'O'Donell over there and I were captured by the rebels. Their leader had studied catering in Bermondsey . . .'

'Man's gone mad,' said Colonel Foster turning to his niece, 'off his chump. In fact everyone's mad in this whole strange affair.'

'O'Donell, wake up, champagne.'

'Thank you,' said O'Donell, waking instantly, 'thank you.'

'The only way you can wake him,' said Steed, 'is to

mention the name of a drink. It's like Pavlov's dogs. Now O'Donell, tell them that I am not lying when I say the leader of the rebels had studied catering in London.'

'True, in Bermondsey.'

'Thank you, here's your drink, you can go back to sleep now.'

Colonel Foster was not amused. 'Another one, barmy the lot of them. What are you talking about Russian dogs in Battersea for? Eh?'

The President pulled up in his newly appropriated car. He walked over to them.

'I want to thank you all very much for your help in this whole matter.'

'Glass of champagne, Mr President?'

'Thank you, Mr Steed, thank you. Don't forget those Dragoon Guards, will you?'

'Another one,' muttered Colonel Foster. 'What's everyone talking about?'

Purdey tweaked his nose playfully.

'Don't worry about it Uncle Elly. Here have some more champagne.'

'I want to thank all of you on behalf of the people of Umbezi. With your help, as promised, Mr Steed, I believe we can become a united and peaceful people again. The Switzerland of Africa.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Gambit.

'Mr Shah,' said Purdey, 'any more of that kedgeree?'

'Definitely. Definitely,' said Mr Shah hurrying off happily.

'So may I wish you all a safe journey back home, and many thanks.'

'Thank you sir. Thank you Mr President.'

Champagne glasses rose all over the verandah of the Shepherd Hotel, and along with them Mr Shah's spirits, to ever greater heights.

They boarded the transports Colonel Foster had brought with him for the flight.

'Nice little country. Must come again,' said Steed. 'Charming people.'

The engines roared and the planes took off one after another, leaving the pea-green of the Umbezi rain forest far below.

'Steed,' said Gambit.

'Yes?'

'How exactly did you convince the leader of the rebels that you could be trusted?'

'Aha, that's a little secret between him and me.'

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